Free Afghanistan

ISSUE No 6
SPRING 1987



WHAT CHANCE OF PEACE?

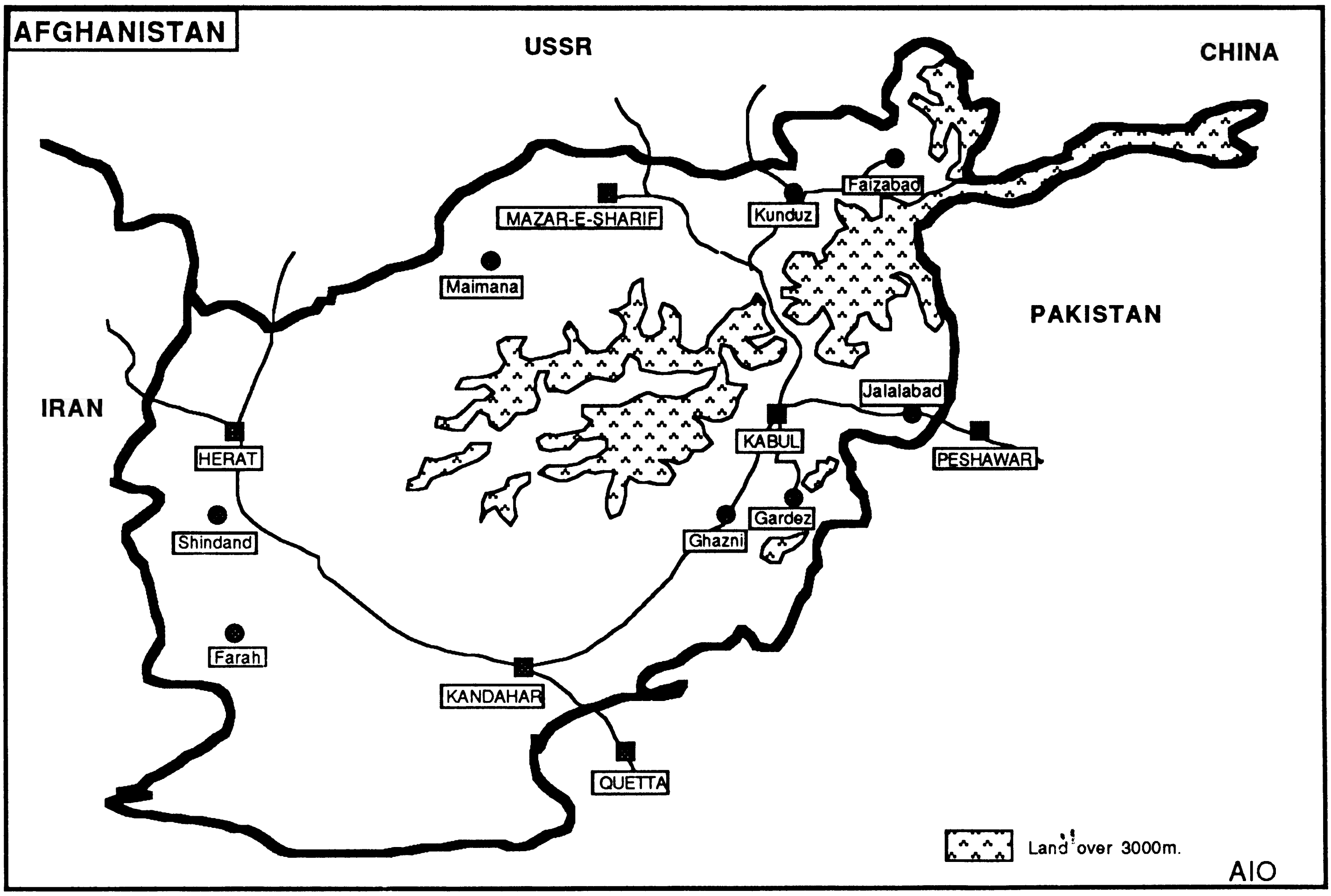
by Julian Gearing and Floris van Straaten

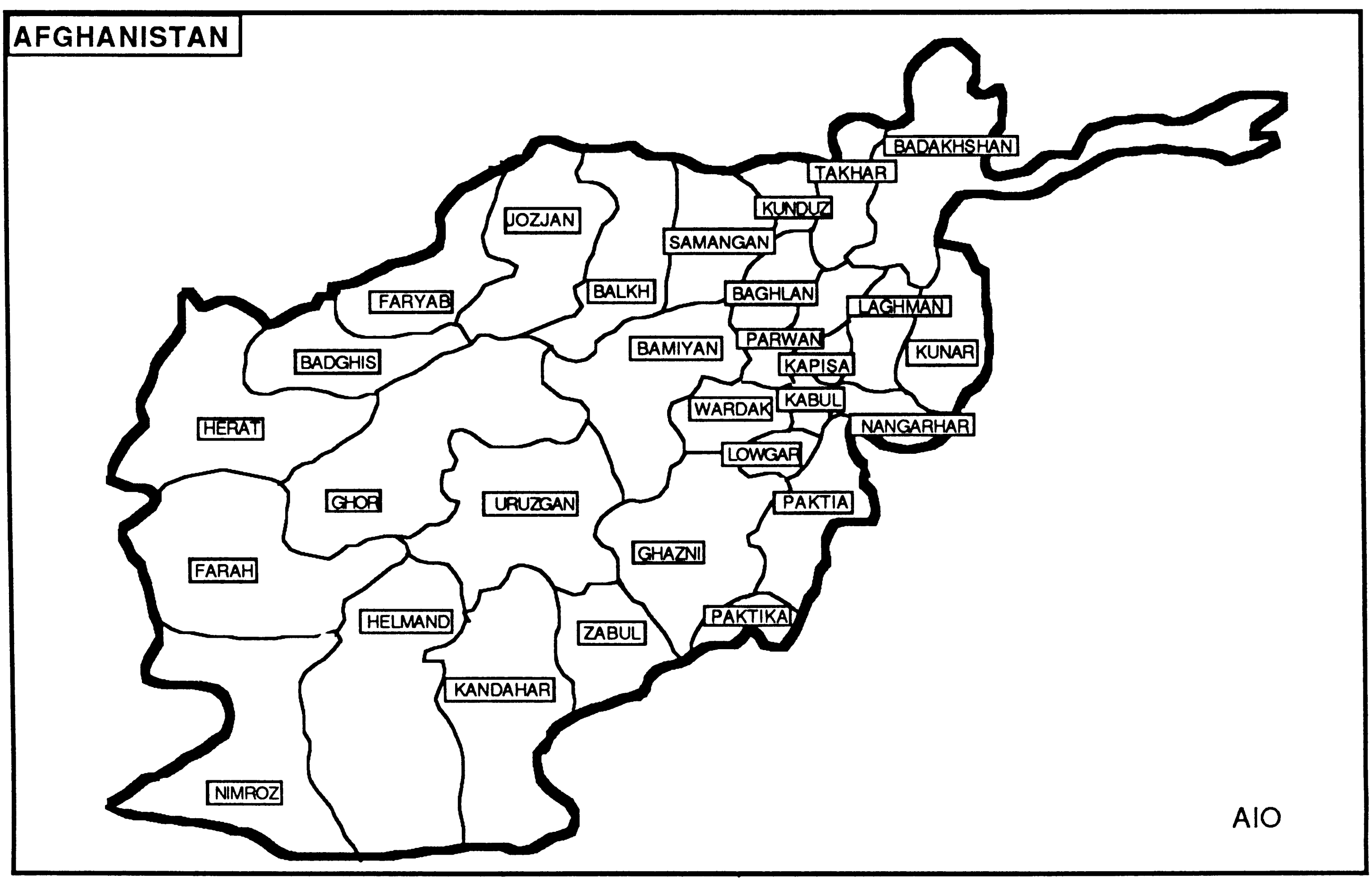
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EXPANSION AT A PRICE

An interview with Ahmed Shah Massoud


AFGHANISTAN
USSR
CHINA
IRAN
PAKISTAN
MAZAR-E-SHARIF
Maimana
Kunduz
Faizabad
HERAT
Shindand
Farah
KABUL
Jalalabad
PESHAWAR
Gardez
Ghazni
KANDAHAR
QUETTA
Land over 3000m.
AIO


AFGHANISTAN
BADAKHSHAN
TAKHAR
KUNDUZ
JOZJAN
SAMANGAN
BALKH
FARYAB
BAGHLAN
LAGHMAN
BADGHIS
BAMIYAN
PARWAN
KUNAR
KAPISA
HERAT
WARDAK
KABUL
NANGARHAR
LOWGAR
GHOR
URUZGAN
PAKTIA
GHAZNI
FARAH
HELMAND
PAKTIKA
ZABUL
KANDAHAR
NIMROZ
AIO

EDITORIAL

In recent months we have seen a shift of focus in the Afghan conflict from the battlefield into the political arena. And despite improved military effectiveness, it is clear that the Afghan guerrillas, the Mujahideen, have failed to gain the initiative on this front.

The biggest challenge to the Mujahideen has come from the Regime in Kabul. Although this Regime has little real power it is extremely adept when it comes to propaganda and publicity. There has been loud talk of a ceasefire and moves towards 'National Reconciliation', but reports make it clear that the situation on the ground has changed little. And so what we are seeing is a war of words in which the Regime is outmanoeuvring the Mujahideen who are responding with the same old rhetoric.

For a period longer than the Second World War, Soviet and Afghan Regime forces have conducted a relentless campaign of attrition in Afghanistan and have driven over a third of the population from their homes. Increasingly war weary, the Afghan people look to the Mujahideen leaders in Peshawar for an answer. Yet what they see is a power game, a competition between the party leaders who increasingly appear out of touch with the wishes of their people on the ground inside Afghanistan. Although efforts have been made, under the umbrella of the Islamic Alliance of Afghan Mujahideen, to coordinate the seven main guerrilla parties, the danger remains that the people will grow tired of a leadership which continues to quarrel while they are forced to suffer.

The Alliance claims to represent the vast majority of the people of Afghanistan. It should demonstrate its commitment to them by putting aside party differences. Although progress towards unity may appear difficult, it is vital that these differences are put aside now. Only a leadership speaking with a unified voice can hope to represent the Mujahideen in their rightful place in negotiations about the future of Afghanistan.

JULIAN GEARING EDITOR



Cover photograph: Despite efforts to improve the performance of the Afghan Regime forces, morale is low and desertion common. Numbers of personnel are estimated at 40,000. Regime soldier at Afghan border, Torkham. *Photo: J. Gearing.*

Free Afghanistan

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Free Afghanistan is published by the Afghanistan Information Office (AIO), part of the Afghanistan Support Committee (ASC). Views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the ASC.
For use of material published in Free Afghanistan please contact AIO, 18 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0LT.

Printed by Abbey Press,
2 Thames View Industrial Park, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 3JW

WHAT CHANCE OF PEACE?

By Julian Gearing and Floris van Straaten

"One of the aims of the Kabul Regime's talk of Peace and National Reconciliation was publicity. In the outside world if one time you say you want peace, that is enough for the world's press and world public opinion. The result is that the people think they are a very nice regime if they want peace, its just the Mujahideen who don't want peace. But the world doesn't realise who caused the problem in Afghanistan, who invaded the country, who bombs and kills people, who has forced the refugees to flee. They forget all this for one word of peace."

Abdul Haq, guerrilla commander, in an interview on 17 March 1987, Pakistan.

Is there any real prospect of peace in Afghanistan? Although seasoned observers agree the conflict has reached a critical and possibly decisive stage, predicting what the coming months will hold has become something of a headache. Attention has moved from the battlefield into the arena of diplomacy and propaganda. And the initiative comes from the Soviet side.

1986 saw the Kremlin talking seriously about the possibility of withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan. On an international level the war has proved a hindrance in its relations both with the Third World and with the West. At home growing dissatisfaction, though on nowhere near the same scale as that experienced by the United States during the Vietnam war, is becoming more of a problem. Keen to show their willingness to get out, six Soviet Regiments withdrew amidst much fanfare and publicity during the summer. Despite criticism that this move was more cosmetic than significant, as propaganda it achieved its aim.

'CEASEFIRE AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION'

But it was the Afghan Regime that commanded all the attention as the country entered its eighth year of Soviet occupation. Following consultation with the Soviet government, the Regime's leader, Mohammed Najib, launched a well-timed 'Peace Initiative', catching the Afghan guerrillas, the Mujahideen, off guard. What was on offer, when he addressed the Communist Party Plenum in Kabul on 30-31 December 1986, was a six-month unilateral ceasefire starting on 15 January 1987 and a renewed drive for 'National Reconciliation', inviting the Afghan people, at home and abroad, to take part in governing the country.

The intention was to show that the Afghan Regime and its Soviet backers were keen for peace in Afghanistan. Their drive for 'National Reconciliation' was an attempt to give the impression that the Regime was becoming more representative of the people, and that the offer was open to everyone, Mujahideen included. However, study of the small print revealed that in order to take part it was necessary, as the Afghan Charge D'Affaires in London stated, that the people 'embrace the revolution'.

KNEE-JERK RESPONSE

Just how to respond to this initiative proved to be the biggest test to date for the seven-party Alliance of Afghan Mujahideen. Poor at publicity and propaganda, their knee-



Refugees flee — Soviet attacks on civilians are increasing. *Photo: J. Gearing.*

jerk response was not only to reject the offer outright but to pledge to step up their military activities from the very day the Regime planned to commence its unilateral ceasefire. In an interview with the BBC correspondent George Arney in February, Najib asked, "Do the people support the lightheaded pronouncements of the guerrilla parties in favour of war, or do they support the quest for peace?"

To the Mujahideen the Regime's initiative was just another attempt to subvert their own efforts. But what they appeared to be unaware of was the effect it was having on the world's media and on a diplomatic level. The picture painted was one of the Regime and the Soviet Union being keen to bring the conflict to an end, but their plans being frustrated by the 'Western backed' guerrillas.

More significant, however, was the effect it had on the cohesion of the Mujahideen Alliance. With little or no attempt to coordinate their response, the different leaders took it upon themselves to reply. The result was a very obvious difference of opinion. Although they agreed on the need to form an 'Interim Government', to operate once an agreement on Soviet withdrawal has been reached, just what form this should take has proved a real sticking point. Although they have set up a committee to work on this, four months after the Regime put forward its proposals there is still no agreement.

WAR NOT 'PEACE'

The vital message that failed to reach the outside world was the reason behind the Mujahideen's apparent intransigence. To understand this it is necessary to examine the events of the last ten years.

Back in 1978, in April, a coup d'etat brought to power the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which although it had a little support in Kabul, had virtually no following in the countryside. Attempting to force reforms rapidly on a country still struggling to enter the Twentieth Century, the response was a backlash on a nationwide scale. Where they went wrong was not so much in the reforms themselves but in the way they went about trying to implement them. Young, radical and overzealous, urban communists rushed out into the countryside and in a dictatorial manner attempted to change Afghan society overnight. The response was not surprising. By the following year the Regime was struggling to contain a spreading insurgency. What changed the nature of the conflict was the Soviet Union's desperate attempt to prop up the crumbling communist regime — the invasion by Soviet forces in December 1979.



"Digging in" — Soviet air and ground attacks have intensified in northern Afghanistan.

The conflict was now not simply a civil war against a communist regime. It had become essentially a war of national liberation, a fight against what were seen as infidel invaders. Many people rushed to take up arms to expel not only the Soviet occupying force but also a Regime which they saw as politically alien — one which had brought the conflict to Afghanistan. If, as the Mujahideen claim, they have the support of the majority of the Afghan people, then it seems that efforts on the part of the Regime to gain support are doomed to failure.

ANOTHER ROUND OF TALKS

Optimism was the key word at the time of the UN-sponsored 'proximity talks' at Geneva which resumed on 25 February. At the centre of negotiations was the key issue of the timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Up until then agreement had been reached between the participants, the Afghan Regime and the Pakistan Government, on three points: the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees at present in Pakistan; the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries; and acceptance of assurances from the Soviet Union, the United States, and China of Afghanistan's independence and nonalignment. The sticking point was the question of what constituted an acceptable timetable for the withdrawal. At this round of talks the gap narrowed. Pakistan suggested seven months, the Afghan Regime, eighteen.

What was strikingly absent from these negotiations were two major factors — the Mujahideen, and the composition of the government which would follow a Soviet withdrawal. Representatives of the Mujahideen have stated repeatedly that only direct talks between themselves and the Soviet Union can resolve the conflict. They have stated that they refuse to sit down and talk with representatives of the Afghan Regime, a 'puppet regime propped up by the Soviets'. Whilst their lack of involvement in the negotiating process may not block a final agreement between Pakistan and Kabul, a refusal by them to go along with it could not only jeopardise the chances of a peaceful outcome but also give the Soviet Union an excuse for their troops to remain in Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union appears to be gambling on a timetable for withdrawal which will allow the Afghan Regime time to consolidate its control over the country. The success of this strategy largely depends on an end to foreign aid to the Mujahideen, one of the conditions of withdrawal. They are gambling that this will result in the resistance petering out. However, this does not take into account the real situation on the ground. Although the Mujahideen groups close to the Pakistan border, who rely heavily on outside aid, would face severe problems, the effect on the groups in the interior of Afghanistan would be more limited. Capturing a significant percentage of their arms supplies, they are less reliant on foreign donors. Another factor is that the foreign arms supplies, funded principally by the United



An increased supply of weapons — but are they going to the effective groups?
Resistance fighter, Nangahar. *Photo: R. Peck.*

States and Saudi Arabia, have been stepped up to such an extent during the last year that some groups have built stockpiles in case supplies dry up. It appears that the odds are changing for the Soviet Union.

A CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP

The speed at which the Soviet Union is able to strengthen the Regime in Kabul is also vitally important. Concerned about the lack of progress, both in the political and military field, the Soviet Union decided in the spring of 1986 to ease out General Secretary Babrak Karmal. The man brought in to take his place was Mohammed Najib, previously head of the notorious Afghan secret police, KHAD. Young, tough and clever, Najib has attempted to broaden support for the Regime, and has been more cautious in implementing social reforms.

Despite his skill at handling the media and his clever attempts at 'National Reconciliation', he has two major handicaps. Firstly, many Afghans still hate and distrust him due to the cruelty of his KHAD agents who during his 5 year tenure tortured and killed many thousands of people. Secondly, as a member of the Parcham faction of the Afghan communist party he is not well liked by the rival Khalq faction. According to some Mujahideen sources in Peshawar, after a period of decline, support for the Khalq faction is on the rise. In all he is an unpopular man, not least with supporters of Karmal, and there is a real question as to just how strong his position is. As one Mujahideen commander, Massoud, commented, "The Soviet Union is the real power behind the Kabul Regime. Najib is only a puppet. If I have a message for him it is only to say he should be careful. Look what happened to his predecessors, Taraki, Amin, and Karmal. His position is not strong. The same thing could happen to him."

FIGHTING STEPPED UP

Now into its eighth year, military activity is intensifying in an attempt by both sides to gain ground. Despite their declared unilateral 'ceasefire', the Afghan Regime, together with the Soviet forces, far from holding back from military engagement, have stepped up their activities in certain key areas. Lack of press coverage of the situation on the ground has enabled the Regime to talk of peace but continue to launch attacks which go largely unreported. Since the ceasefire was meant to come into effect, from 15 January, much attention has been levelled at the provinces bordering Pakistan. Containing known routes and depots for arms supplies, Paktia, Nangarhar, and Kunar have been subject to heavy bombing and ground offensives in an attempt to stifle Mujahideen operations. Yet some groups of Mujahideen in these Pushtun tribal areas appear to be improving their military skills under this pressure. As one commander commented recently, it is a matter of "fight back or get out".

Over recent months the northern plains have come under heavy Soviet bombing and ground offensives. The Soviet strategy, apart from securing the cities, roads, and military bases, appears to be aimed at pacifying the northern plains. Sketchy reports and eyewitness accounts from refugees indicate this move began in earnest in 1986 with the heaviest attacks on Mujahideen and civilians since the war began. As one Mujahideen spokesman described it, "not only are they are digging in, but they seem to be thinking of the plains as an extension of the Soviet Union".

This digging in, contrary to the impression given of a possible Soviet withdrawal in the near future, appears to be taking place in other parts of the country. Reports of the building of underground bases, whether, for example, near the Khyber pass or in Farah, is not the behaviour of a country that is willing to relinquish control too quickly.

Heavy Soviet offensives have also been launched in recent months around the cities of Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat in concerted attempts to prevent attacks by the Mujahideen. Security around air-bases has become a major concern following the Mujahideen's aquisition, in late 1986, of US-made Stinger surface-to-air missiles.

STINGERS AND THE 'REAGAN DOCTRINE'

A great deal of play has been made by Kabul, Moscow, as well Washington, about the supply of Stingers to the Mujahideen. The US Administration, as part of the 'Reagan Doctrine' of confronting, so-called 'communist expansion', has been publicising its supply of these weapons to the 'freedom fighters of Afghanistan, Angola, and Nicaragua'. This has given the Soviet Union and the Afghan Regime ammunition for their propaganda effort which blames the war on 'foreign interference'.

The US Administration has made public its plans to send $600 million worth of military aid to the Mujahideen. To date, they report that 150 Stingers have been delivered, with a further 300 to follow. Western journalists who have been with the

Mujahideen in Nangarhar at various times during the last six months confirm the presence of these weapons, though the numbers are difficult to verify.

The strike rate of these missiles has been high, partly due to the (efficiency) of the missile itself and partly the training and back-up being given. Small Mujahideen units have been trained in their use against helicopters and jets. Combined with the existing anti-aircraft capability, consisting of heavy machine-guns, the Mujahideen were claiming a success rate of as much as one aircraft shot down a day during the latter months of 1986.

The introduction of these weapons has proved a major headache for Kabul and Moscow. Flying tactics and operations have had to be drastically altered in an attempt to minimise losses. Whilst not necessarily a panacea for the Mujahideen these weapons are changing the face of the war.

PRESSURES ON PAKISTAN

Military attacks have not just taken place on the Afghan side of the Durand Line. The border areas of Pakistan have been repeatedly bombed and rocketed by Soviet jets, targeting not only Mujahideen but also Afghan refugees and Pakistani civilians. Casualties have been high. In one raid, in March 1987, over 50 people were killed and 105 injured, mostly civilians. The town of Peshawar was subject to a terrorist bombing campaign apparently sponsored by the Afghan Regime. In February 1987, a bomb planted in a truck exploded killing 14 people and injuring over 50. Most of the victims were Pakistani school children. This incident sparked off a wave of riots by Pakistanis protesting at the continued presence of the Mujahideen and refugees in Pakistan. Much of the unrest was orchestrated by supporters of the Pakistan opposition parties keen to stir up trouble for the government of Zia ul Haq.

These attacks were timed to coincide with specific diplomatic moves taking place as a lead up to, and during, the UN-sponsored Geneva talks. The intention was to put pressure on Pakistan to be more flexible in the negotiations over the timetable for a possible Soviet withdrawal. Yet pressure was coming from a different quarter to do just the opposite. The US Administration, though stating that there should be a Soviet withdrawal as soon as possible, does not want a timetable which will allow the Regime in Kabul to consolidate its power. Therefore it has been putting pressure on Pakistan to hold out for a fast withdrawal.

Another factor complicating the situation is that of Pakistan's need to defend its borders. Its request for radar aircraft from the US has set off alarm bells in Moscow, Kabul and Delhi. And so, unless Soviet jets cease their periodic violation of Pakistan territory, it may result in a scenario where tension in the region is escalated still further.

CIVILIANS THE LOSERS

Unable to gain ground against the Mujahideen, the Soviet and Afghan Regime forces have turned their attention to a soft target — the civilians. During the summer months of 1986 refugees continued to stream over the mountains into exile. Fleeing Soviet bombing and ground attacks, many had to walk for weeks to reach Pakistan or Iran. Overwhelmed by the number of refugees still arriving on their soil, Pakistan has been slow to register newcomers, with the result that thousands are left without shelter and food. According to a Mujahideen spokesman, on one night in November 1986 24 people died of exposure as they slept in the open. Many were children.

This situation has been complicated by the method of registration. In order for refugees to receive food they must first register with one of the seven main Mujahideen parties. However, because one of the parties is receiving preferential treatment from the Pakistanis many people have been forced to join this party due to necessity. As a spokesman from another party explained, "this has caused a major problem for our fighters at the front, when their families who have fled to Pakistan have ended up registering with another party in order to get food."

Not all people who have fled their homes end up in the refugee camps. There are estimated to be between one and two million displaced people inside the country. Some have fled to the cities in order to excape the bombing. Others are camped out in the mountains, unable or unwilling to move too far from their homes. Unlike those who have escaped to Pakistan or Iran, for these people there is no official infrastructure of support. Some Private Voluntary Organisations have started running emergency 'cash-for-food' programmes clandestinely inside the country in an attempt to cope with the problem, but they stress that more help is needed.

POOR HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

According to the United Nations and Amnesty International the human rights situation in Afghanistan is critical. Although the Mujahideen are known to have committed human rights violations in the past, the majority have been carried out by the Afghan Regime and the Soviet occupying forces. Through reprisal attacks, indiscriminate air and artillery bombardments, use of antipersonnel mines, arbitrary killings, and torture, they have sought to intimidate the Afghan people into submission or having to flee the country. The conflict has resulted in the biggest refugee problem in the world. 5 million people, almost a third of the pre-war population, have been forced into exile.

Both the UN and Amnesty faced problems when attempting to gain access in order to verify or substantiate stories. The Afghan Regime's refusal to cooperate has resulted in all testimonies being obtained from exiles. However, both organisations interviewed a cross-section of alleged victims as well as obtaining information and documentation from individuals and organisations. Their findings are a stark indictment of the actions of the Regime and Soviet forces. As Felix Ermacora, Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, concluded in his report to the UN in February 1987, the "continuation of the military situation in Afghanistan will lead to a situation approaching genocide."

'RUSSIANS DIGGING IN'

While people talk of peace the fighting in Afghanistan is escalating. The Soviet and Afghan Regime forces are making a concerted drive to cripple the Mujahideen. In response the Mujahideen, virtually impotent in the diplomatic field, have stepped up their military effort. Both sides are reluctant to compromise.

As far as the Soviet presence is concerned, there seems to be a genuine desire by Gorbachev to withdraw. However, the big question is when? He is still pressing for a withdrawal timetable which he hopes will allow the Regime to consolidate control. But even if an agreement is reached in Geneva no account is being made of the reaction of the Mujahideen. They vow to continue fighting as long as the Afghan Regime remains in power. So unless the Mujahideen become involved in the negotiating process, peace can only remain a distant prospect.

THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE SOVIET EMPIRE

S. Enders Wimbush

The Society for Central Asian Studies

One of the consequences of the Soviet war in Afghanistan which was largely unanticipated by most Western, and perhaps Soviet, experts is its spill-over in many ways into the extended Soviet empire. We now witness considerable anti-Soviet resonance directly attributable to Soviet involvement in Afghanistan among non-Russian peoples from Soviet Central Asia to Eastern Europe. At the beginning of the conflict, however, it was widely assumed among Western analysts and policy makers that little resonance could exist inside the empire because the Soviets themselves had succeeded largely in purging the collective awareness of the non-Russian peoples of past Russian imperialism at their expense; moreover, it was widely believed, the process of Russian-directed 'sovietisation' was sufficiently advanced to involve non-Russians in the broader aims and objectives of the Soviet state, creating for non-Russians a stake in the system which they would be reluctant to oppose. Under these conditions, not only was dissent over the Afghanistan adventure thought to be unlikely, but also non-Russian support for the Soviet effort was frequently deemed probable if not logical.

We know now that these assumptions were overly optimistic and in some cases simply wrong. At the outset, the Soviet authorities themselves may have been victims of their own propaganda on this score, but their decision within a few months of the invasion to withdraw most Soviet Muslim troops and to replace them with more reliable Slavs or to shift them into non-combat roles is telling evidence of a lesson rapidly learned. We now possess plentiful evidence from many sources — e.g. Western and Muslim-world journalists, Soviet defectors, Afghan resistance fighters, and even the Soviet press itself — of the unreliability of Soviet Muslims in Afghanistan and of their wide-spread identification with the Mujahideen cause rather than Moscow's. For this reason and because of the accelerating discontent with Soviet involvement in other parts of the empire among Russians and non-Russians alike, Soviet authorities instructed their official media not to discuss the war, except obliquely, for nearly two years following the invasion. As war-related problems mounted at home, and especially since the new candour associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's 'glasnost' ('openness') campaign of the last two years has come on stream, Soviet media now reveal a multitude of problems within the empire which can no longer be ignored. Underground and unofficial sources continue to supplement and lend texture to what Soviet media are now willing to say. Together they provide a picture of significant discontent within the empire, which Soviet leaders can find anything but consoling.

As might have been anticipated, the war has probably affected the Turko-Iranic peoples of Soviet Central Asia, who share historical, cultural, ethnic and religious bonds with most of the Afghan peoples north of the Hindu Kush, more profoundly than elsewhere. We have learned from unofficial sources, for example, of two serious mutinies, in 1981 and 1985, among Soviet Muslim troops inside Afghanistan; of a rebellion of Soviet Muslim North Caucasian soldiers in the USSR, who were being trained for service in Afghanistan; of riots in Alma-Ata (1980), when Soviet officials attempted to bury Kazakh war dead in ordinary, non-religious cemeteries rather than in Muslim ones; and of severe Soviet reprisals against Soviet Muslims near Termez who demonstrated openly in support of the Afghan resistance.

From Soviet sources we learn, for example, of the frequent draft-evasion of Soviet Muslim youth; of the penetration of Soviet territory by written and taped materials produced by the Mujahideen for Soviet Muslims; of the growing insecurity of the Soviet southern border, which confirms what we know from other sources that Mujahideen in fact are making frequent trips into the USSR to mobilise Soviet Muslims; and of the upsurge in Islamic activity among Soviet Muslims.

Of these concerns, the last would appear to exercise Soviet officials most. According to Soviet sources, Islam in the USSR is assuming new, political dimensions which have important implications for the way in which Central Asia will evolve. Worried Soviet offícals and specialists now speak of 'Muslim nationalisms' developing appeal to intellectuals and young people: two classes who have been thought to be largely immune to 'reactionary' stimuli. They inveigh further against 'religious ideologists' who are not themselves practising Muslims, but who use Islam as a political instrument to pursue distinctly anti-Soviet aims. Since the early 1980s, large quantities of Islamic samizdat (underground literature) has begun to appear to underline this interest. The resurgence of Islamic activity, which was recently condemned in Tashkent by Gorbachev himself, is almost certainly attributable to contacts resulting from the Afghanistan war and, somewhat earlier, stimuli from the revolution in Iran. Soviet authorities are justifiably concerned that their own Muslims will continue to organise themselves around Islam; and the recent Iranian experience can give them little comfort: it was, after all, to the mosques (most of which are underground in the USSR) that Khomeini directed his appeals, knowing that this was the one institution in Iranian life the Shah's secret police could not penetrate. Not surprisingly, the responsible Soviet organs have opened a massive anti-Islamic campaign in Central Asia and the North Caucasus, which gathers momentum even as Gorbachev expounds his

'glasnost' ideas of more freedom to an enraptured Western press.

Beyond Central Asia, the war in Afghanistan has been felt in Ukraine and the Baltic states, all of which are producing a growing volume of samizdat against the war, demonstrations by young people against serving there and mourning their friends lost in battle, and veterans' groups who complain openly that they were poorly treated while in Afghanistan and even more poorly now that they have returned home. From Baltic samizdat, in particular, one hears the repeated theme that this is at bottom a Russian war which the Russians are forcing others to fight for them.

In Eastern Europe Poles are among the most active sympathisers with the Mujahideen. 'You don't need to tell any Pole about Afghanistan,' one of my Polish friends informed me. 'They all know about it, and having lived so long under Russian domination they empathise fully with the Mujahideen.' Poles have also developed an extraordinarily active underground network of information about Afghanistan. Underground printing presses daily produce stamps and posters urging Poles to resist the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan any way they can. About twenty Poles associated with the outlawed trade union Solidarity have in fact found their way to Afghanistan to fight with the Mujahideen, and at least one is known to have been killed in battle. Evidence from other Eastern European countries is less plentiful, although the exploits of a young East German who is now fighting with the Afghan resistance were recently chronicled in several Western newspapers.

Multinational empires invariably are tuned instruments. What plays at one end usually resonates at the other, and this clearly is the case in the Soviet empire with regard to the Afghanistan war. Today Soviet efforts to limit the damage have proved ineffective, and by their own admission the problems attributable to the war that spill into the empire continue to multiply and intensify. Indeed, one might argue, with the appearance in Afghanistan of Eastern European 'advisors' of one kind or another the Soviets are simply creating more channels through which unfavourable information about Soviet aims and conduct will pass to larger populations at home who have never reconciled themselves to Soviet rule. Indeed, it would be naive to believe that Afghanistan's adverse impact on the larger empire is not one of the prime motivations of the current Soviet leadership to seek a way out of the conflict. While we should never underestimate Soviet ability to control the populations under Moscow's domination through sheer force, neither should we underestimate the importance of events like the Afghanistan war to whittle away at the Russians' capacity to rule their empire through other than force. Time and historical forces collaborate to make imperial rule hard to maintain under any conditions, as the demise of all the other large empires attests to. What began as a brushfire war in Afghanistan yesterday cannot today be fully understood outside this wider historical context. As the French discovered in Algeria, little far-away brush wars have a way of becoming imperial fault lines.



This stamp is produced by the Polish Underground and is sold openly on the streets of large Polish cities for 100 zlotys.
The caption reads: "In answer to the appeal of the International Red Cross in Geneva, we are collecting funds for medical aid to the Afghan partisans fighting communism." — 'Freedom and Peace Party'. -*Courtesy Society for Central Asian Studies.*

EXPANSION AT A PRICE

An interview with Ahmed Shah Massoud

Julian Gearing

"If Massoud seeks peace, and if he wants to work towards the prosperity of the Afghan people, we are prepared to sit down and negotiate with him.'

Ahmed Sarwar, Afghan Embassy Charge d'Affaires, London, 7th January 1987.

A year ago any mention of the name Ahmed Shah Massoud would have been met with derision in Afghan Regime circles. But this response was only an effort to cover up the real concern they felt over the increasing power of one of the top Resistance commanders in Afghanistan. Even if the new language now being used by the Regime's leader, Dr Najib, were to indicate a genuine attempt to allow elements of the Resistance to participate in a government of 'national reconciliation', is it likely that Massoud would be willing to sit down and talk?

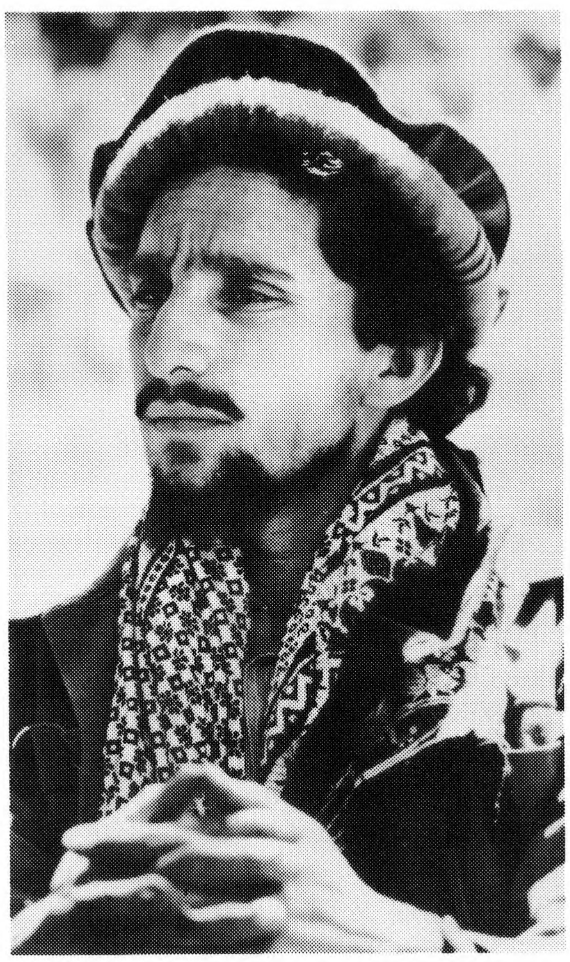
In an interview at the beginning of November 1986 in Takhar, prior to the Regime's announcement of a unilateral ceasefire, I asked him whether he was willing to do business with Najib.

"The Soviet Union is the real power behind the Kabul Regime. Najib is only a puppet. If I have a message for him it is only to say he should be careful. Look what happened to his predecessors, Taraki, Amin, and Karmal. His position is not strong. The same thing could happen to him".

In contrast Massoud appeared confident about his own position.

"Although our fighters have been subjected to a number of heavy attacks this year, we have been able to cope. Our area of operation has expanded so that we are now co-ordinating our activities in five provinces of the North; Parwan, Kapisa, Baghlan, Takhar, and Kunduz. Areas of Badakhshan and Kabul province are also receiving our attention."

"A practical example of how successful this co-ordination has been took place in the summer when the Government garrison at Fakhar fell to our combined forces from five different valleys. This was a major achievement and follows on from a co-ordinated attack on the main air-base and surrounding posts in Kunduz."



Ahmad Shah Massoud. *Photo: J. Gearing.*

But Fakhar was not an isolated incident. Two weeks after this interview a repeat performance was staged against a larger garrison, this time at Nahrin. Again using combined forces from different areas under the leadership of the local commander, Abdul Hay Haqjoo, the position fell. However, during both these operations Soviet and Afghan air cover was noticeably absent. When jets and helicopters thunder overhead Massoud's men appear powerless. Lacking an effective anti-aircraft capability they scurry for cover, sometimes into the safety of tunnels dug into the mountainside. Despite the disclosure by US government officials that the Reagan Administration has sent $300 million in covert military aid over the past year to the Resistance, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, was Massoud receiving outside help?

"To date, no Stinger missles have been sent. As for the quantity of weapons we have received, the amount is small and mostly in the form of light weapons. The reason for this is because they are supplied through the Pakistanis and the Pakistani generals take the good new weapons. A couple of years ago we received some heavy weapons, for example the Chinese 107 mm ground-to-ground missile, but the supply has been reduced. It is always like this, having this problem with the generals in Pakistan."

"Many of the weapons we obtain are captured from the enemy. For example, we were able to capture heavy weapons from the garrison of Fakhar this summer. The weapons we need now are those with a long range to hit the enemy from a distance. Only after these do we need anti-aircraft weapons."

Although, as the middle man, Pakistan has supplied a small number of Stinger missiles to Resistance groups close to the border, it appears unlikely that Massoud will receive any. In the eyes of the Pakistan military, Massoud is too independent and does not have the strong relationship with the generals that for example, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Abdul Haq enjoy.

What weapons do get through are brought over the mountains of the

Hindu Kush. Apart from the natural difficulties of the route during the short season that it is open, close to their destination arms convoys are often attacked by Soviet jets. Bomb craters and the debris of torn metal scar the trail.

Although Massoud has had some success against Kabul Regime positions, to tip the balance of the war in his favour his forces will have to start taking Soviet targets. This could prove a significantly more difficult proposition.

"Our strategy involves first establishing a stronghold in the mountains, organising the Resistance, and increasing the level of fighting. But we are not now at the stage where we are able to attack these more strategic targets. This will take time. As we can see the level of our attacks is higher than any previous year and our work at co-ordination is better than ever before.

But it is expansion at a price. Unable to crush Massoud's forces, Soviet attention is increasingly focusing on a vulnerable target, the civilians. Long lines of refugees fleeing to the safety of Pakistan and the numerous cave shelters of those remaining are visible evidence of the severity of the campaign.

Massoud was concerned at the size of the problem. "We have 70,000 civilians to care for who have fled their homes in the Panjshir Valley. And this does not take into account the people in the North."

"It is very difficult for the civilians to live with the constant threat of bombardment by jets or ground-to-ground missiles. We have received some Western humanitarian aid for those who have no means of support, but recently the situation became so desperate that some families were forced to live off wild plants."

Discussions with French and Swiss aid workers carrying out a programme in the area indicate the problem is getting worse. "The Soviets are targeting the civilians in the North. Those who have already fled the destruction of their homes face a bleak winter hiding in the mountains, or in makeshift shelters on the outskirts of the cities."

This is where Massoud's critics feel the Soviet forces may be achieving their aim. They point to the Panjshir Valley as an area which is now devoid of much of its civilian support. Soviet destruction appears to have increased in the North as Massoud expands his area of operation.

How does Massoud respond to Gorbachev's talk of withdrawal?

"Recently we heard that Gorbachev was pulling 7,000 of his troops out of Afghanistan. This move means nothing. It does not indicate an intention to withdraw all his troops. These heavy attacks on our people indicate the true Soviet intention."

When asked about the Reagan Administration's involvement in the issue, Massoud was firm. "Reagan should be made aware that Afghanistan should not be treated as a political pawn. The plight of our country should be the concern of everybody in the West. A major power has invaded a small country and this could happen in other parts of the world. But governments should be involved in the question of Afghanistan for the right reasons."

"Even if all aid ceased, even if the border were closed, we would continue to fight."



"Plans in mind, on paper, and in action." Massoud discusses overrunning the garrison at Nahrin. *Photo: J. Gearing.*

WHAT CHANCE OF PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN ?



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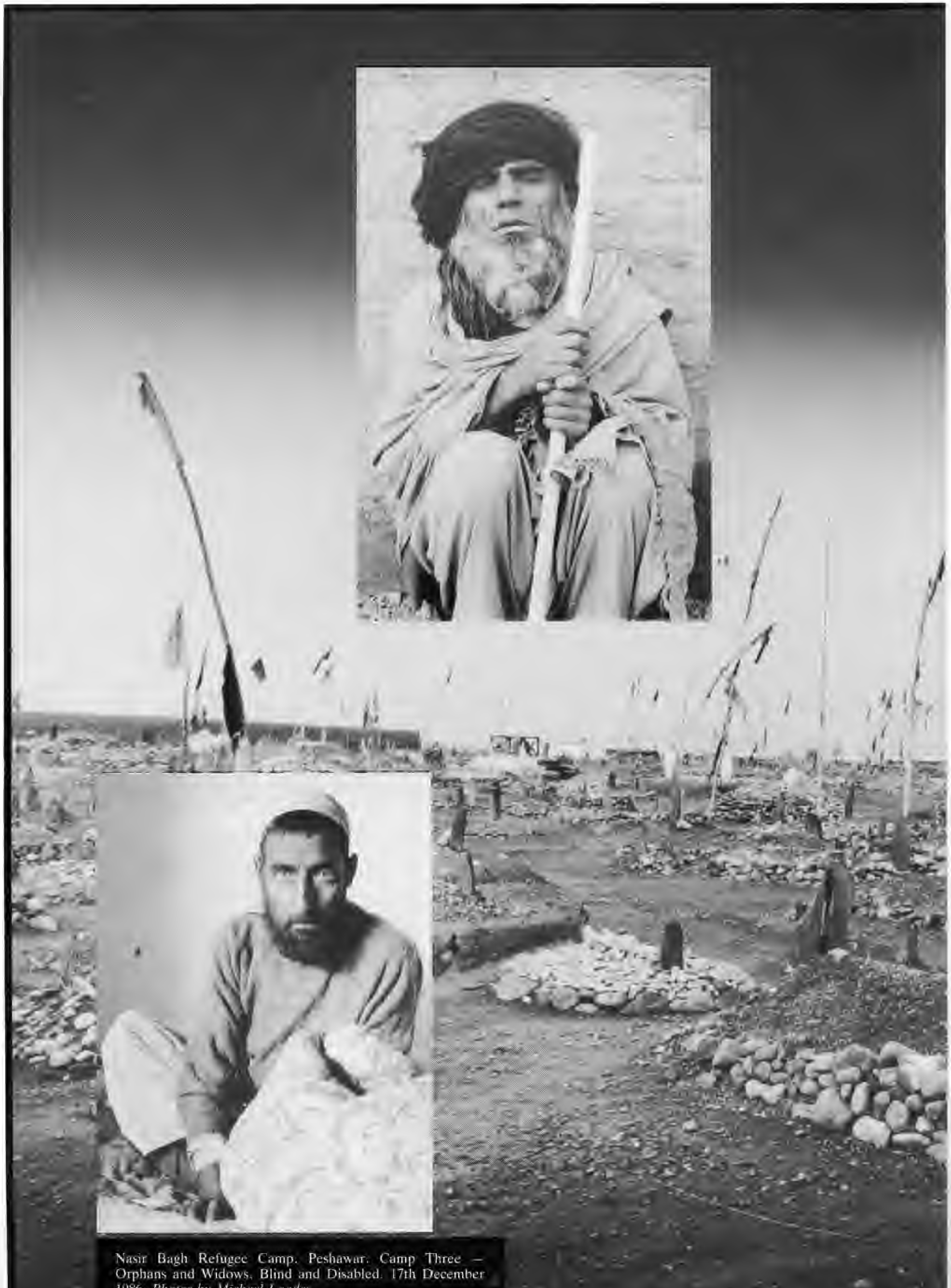
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Refugees Flee - Soviet attacks on civilians are increasing.



Nasir Bagh Refugee Camp, Peshawar. Camp Three – Orphans and Widows, Blind and Disabled. 17th December 1986. *Photos by Michael Loades.*



AN OLD WAR; AFGHANISTAN AND THE WESTERN PRESS

Anthony Hyman

Perhaps the best guide to the ways of the Western press and its passing or casual interest in those frequent "small wars" of far-off lands comes in literature. Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel SCOOP (1938) says it all.

Lord Copper, the powerful and cynical British press magnate instructs the new (and utterly green) foreign correspondent William Boot, who is off to Africa to cover a small war for the BEAST newspaper;

"With regard to Policy, I expect you already have your own views. I never hamper my correspondents in any way. What the British public wants first, last and all the time is News. Remember that the Patriots are in the right and are going to win. The BEAST stands by them four square. But they must win quickly. The British public has no interest in a war which drags on indecisively. A few sharp victories, some conspicuous acts of personal bravery on the Patriot side and a colourful entry into the capital. That is the BEAST Policy for the war."

It may be objected, of course, that SCOOP is "merely" a novel, an old one at that, dating from half a century ago, that it was meant as a satire, not an analysis of the triviality or superficiality of the British "Free Press". That is all true, as far as it goes.

Yet who can honestly say there is not an element of truth in this caricature of Fleet Street's standards? Evelyn Waugh himself, after all, had detailed first-hand experience of the bizarre ways of foreign news coverage, as a foreign correspondent in Africa.

Lord Copper's statement on his newspaper's Policy in the novel is franker, certainly, than one would expect from a real life contemporary editor or proprietor. But is it essentially different? The attention of the public is, indeed, notoriously fickle, and the boredom threshold begins early on with far-off wars — especially wars in which neither side appears to be winning, or breaking out of a stalemate.

"They must win quickly". Lord Copper spoke about the Patriots in Scoop's imaginary state in Africa. The press magnate could have been warning the Afghan guerrillas to get a move on, or risk becoming a bore. The public is fickle. "The British public has no interest in a war which drags on indecisively".

Editors would need to be zealous about educating their readers to persevere in such circumstances. The ambitions of many editorial teams, though, are limited to entertainment, to catching the attention of a public of which, sadly, all too little is expected.

Editorial policy all too rarely seeks to persevere with a story which may be important — what isn't?, says the cynic — but has the misfortune of being already old. If it's old news, it's stale news. An editor is not paid, after all, to act or think like a University lecturer. What the public wants, or is supposed to want, it tends to get. Entertainment, at least as much as enlightenment, is seen as the aim of the Press — and not only the tabloids.

It is the indifference and superficiality of the media which is really the complaint. This is quite different from the deliberate slanting of news reporting intended to convey the official line, to be found in so many countries of the world with a state-controlled media.

Let us look at a recent example of coverage of Afghanistan, in just one middlebrow newspaper familiar to millions of Londoners, the *Evening Standard*.

"AFGHANISTAN DEAL. RUSSIA TO PULL OUT ITS TROOPS", screamed the headline on the front page of 15 January. That is big news, after all. But look into the story. You don't have to read far to understand that the dramatic headline is wholly unjustified. Buried in the article is a very serious qualification of the truth of the headline.

"The burly, dark-haired Najibullah gave no immediate details of the agreement with Moscow but Afghan officials said it was likely to be dependent on the success of his plan for conciliation between the Government and the guerillas." So admits the Standard Foreign News Desk, in less dramatic vein, evidently quoting the news agencies reports from Kabul.

In plain English, this means no Afghanistan deal — not, at least, until other conditions are satisfied. It also seems to show that headlines are one thing, the actual story often quite another.

The sudden granting of visas to Kabul this January for a troupe of Moscow-based foreign correspondents was certainly good, because it helped revive dormant interest in the Afghan issue in many of the more serious Western newspapers. Their detailed reports of the group visit to Afghanistan were lively and often perceptive. Even if Western journalists were clearly invited for a purpose, (to witness the successful policy of the Najib government in reaching ceasefire agreements), by and large they kept their independent, questioning stance. This was in marked contrast to a number of journalists on earlier, independent visits who tended to swallow some very bizarre claims made by the plausible young men and women of the PDPA cadres who guided, and translated, for them.

Signs of movement on the Afghan involvement by Moscow — however qualified — together with the prospect — however vague — of withdrawal of Soviet troops are undoubtedly big news. Even if the peace terms actually on offer for coalition government and "national reconciliation" look, on careful inspection, little different in essence from the present domination by the ruling PDPA regime, they are bound to be received with keen interest by the international media.

It would, in any case, be stupid to dismiss out of hand the significance of any peace feelers from Moscow or Kabul, after years of such destructive warfare, and the scale of human suffering borne by the Afghan people. The Russians do have serious problems with their small, troublesome Asian neighbour, and

may well sincerely wish to get stability in Afghanistan, as well as to disentangle their forces from the brutal war there which is, of course, continuing to damage the USSR's image internationally.

What independent-minded journalists should bear in mind at this time, though, is that a carefully calculated "Peace offensive" is being mounted from Moscow and Kabul. We are witnessing a co-ordinated propaganda which tries hard to give the impression that if the Afghan war continues any longer, it is the fault only of bellicose Afghan guerrilla leaders (based safely across the border in Pakistan), and of cynical Imperialist trouble-makers led by the USA.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan is already old history — and therefore not known, or barely known by many people. It is the Afghans themselves who know best the extent of Soviet interference and calamities suffered since the initial 1978 Saur coup, which placed a communist regime in power in Kabul. The Soviet invasion at the end of 1979, whatever else it did, transformed an existing Afghan civil war into a much bigger independence struggle which is still continuing.

It is important not to lose sight of how the Afghan struggle began, and why the Afghan opposition attracted such overwhelming popular backing from the general population. The Mujahideen are fighting for a number of interlinked causes, which can be summed up as Islam, the genuine independence of their country, and the freedom to choose a government of their own instead of the puppet regime imposed by foreigners.

The point of this magazine, and others like it in other countries, is to remind the public of the merits of this struggle in a far-off land. It is necessary to continue doing so partly because there is a powerful and ably-conducted propaganda for the "cause of progress and peace", ie Moscow, but also because of the indifference or cynicism of much of the Western media.

Raising the Janda on Nawroz

A New Year's Celebration

Nancy Hatch Dupree

Nawroz, the Afghan New Year, which falls on 21st March, is traditionally the most exuberantly celebrated holiday in Afghanistan. Marking the beginning of spring, it is a celebration of happy expectations. As with all Afghan festive occasions it is a time for families to gather and to feast, but at *Nawroz* a special delicacy called *haft mewa* (seven fruits), a compot made from Afghanistan's most prized dried fruits and nuts, symbolizes nature's bounty for the individual and the nation.

Apart from family get-togethers, the nation's most elaborate *Nawroz* festival takes place in Mazar-i-Sharif, the largest city in northern Afghanistan. Thousands upon thousands travel to this city at the time of the Gul-i-Surkh (Red Blossom; tulip) Festival, which symbolizes the blossoming of hopes for the coming year.

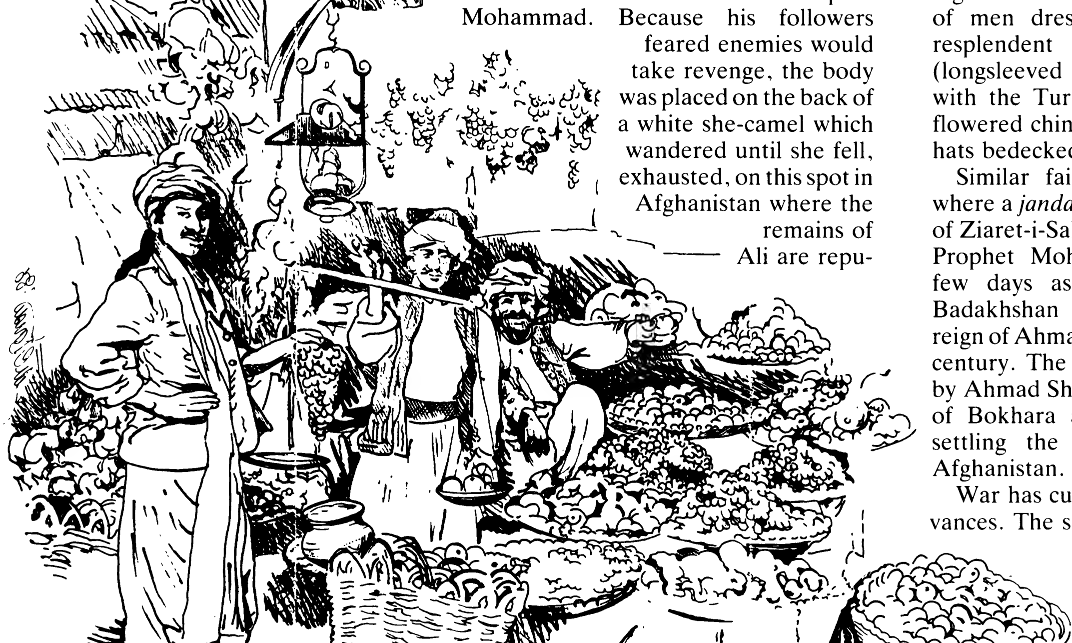
To announce the beginning of spring, the great *Janda* (religious banner) is raised in the courtyard of the magnificent shrine which occupies the cetnre of the city, the Mazar-i-Sharif or Tomb of the Exalted. At the signal for the raising, the crowd surges forward, for all who can touch the standard as it is lifted are assured of prosperity during the next year.

According to Afghan tradition, the shrine of Mazar-i-Sharif marks the resting place of the Hazrat Ali who was assassinated in Iraq in 661 A.D., a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad. Because his followers feared enemies would take revenge, the body was placed on the back of a white she-camel which wandered until she fell, exhausted, on this spot in Afghanistan where the remains of Ali are reputedly buried. Local belief holds that because this shrine is so holy each and every grey pigeon joining the thousands of white pigeons which make their home here will become totally white in just forty days. Pilgrims feed the pigeons, so the flock multiplies and prospers. Their flights against the azure tiles encasing the imposing shrine add immeasurable charm to this most venerated site.

During *Nawroz* the exciting bustle of a great fair attracts added attention. Carousels whirl, storytellers hold crowds entranced, wandering mendicants in bizarre costumes hold forth, dancers and musicians perform, and the *sircas* (circus) pitches its tent. Food stalls abound, the most colourful being the candy sellers with their baskets piled high with shimmering baubles. Crowds of men dressed in silk turbans and resplendent many-hued *chapan* (longsleeved cloaks) vie for attention with the Turkomen women draped in flowered chintz robes set off by tall red hats bedecked with silver ornaments.

Similar fairs take place in Kabul, where a *janda* is also raised at the shrine of Ziaret-i-Sakhi where the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed was kept for a few days as it was conveyed from Badakhshan to Kandahar during the reign of Ahmad Shah Durrani in the 18th century. The Cloak had been obtained by Ahmad Shah Durrani from the Amir of Bokhara as part of a 1691 treaty settling the northern boundaries of Afghanistan.

War has curtailed these happy observances. The spirit of *Nawroz* prevails.



'The Bazaar at Kandahar' by Jill Donald, artist with the British Archeological Team in Afghanistan, 76-79, now living and working in Paris.

'HISBE ISLAMI AND AFGHANISTAN'

An interview with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

Julian Gearing

Concerned that the war in Afghanistan is being seen increasingly as part of the conflict between the Superpowers, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is careful to distance himself publicly from contact with the United States. As leader of Hisbe Islami, one of the seven parties making up the Alliance of Aghan Mujahideen, his strong stance has meant that his views are not always in line with those of the other leaders.

Rebuffing President Regan's invitation to the United States in the summer of 1986, Hekmatyar and Professor Sayyaf stayed in Pakistan while four of the leaders received 'red carpet' treatment. At the time this difference seriously threatened the Alliance.

Hekmatyar is a controversial figure. Considered a radical fundamentalist, his quest for power has at times put him in direct conflict with other Mujahideen parties. With talk of a possible Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan the question remains as to what role he envisages for himself in a future Government of the country.

In two interviews – London, December 1986 and Peshawar, Pakistan, March 1987 – Hekmatyar put forward his ideas on the present and future of Afghanistan.

With talk of the Soviet Union wishing to extricate itself from Afghanistan, do you think Gorbachev wants to pull his troops out?

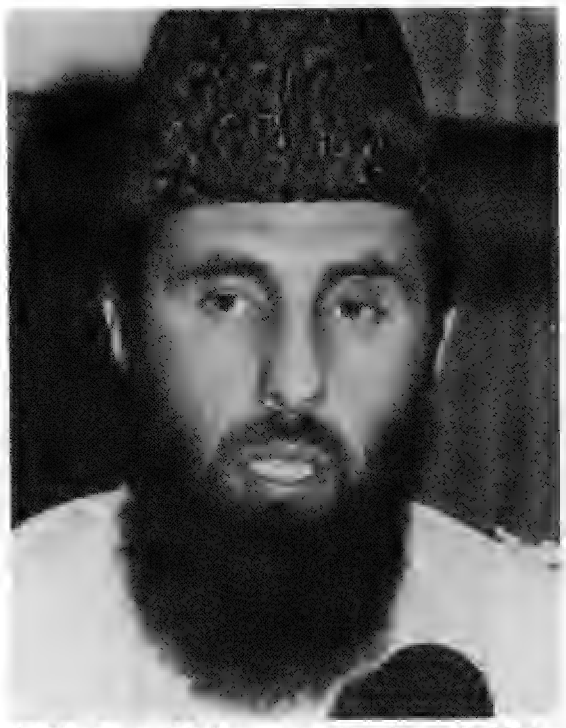
"No; more than that. He is saying they are not willing to stay forever in Afghanistan. They are willing to withdraw as soon as possible, the solution of the Afghanistan issue is near. This means the Russians are disappointed about their continuing military presence in Afghanistan. I think the Russians have two ways open to them, either to encourage an attack on Pakistan or withdraw from Afghanistan."

The Soviet Union withdrew six regiments in the summer of 1986. What was the significance of this move?

"I think at that time they were just withdrawing these regiments for publicity, to show that they were willing to withdraw. But otherwise what was the effectiveness of these six regiments out of the large number of troops in Afghanistan? Many of the personnel were not useful in the Afghan war".

Reports from Pakistan indicate that as many as 8,000 refugees were leaving Afghanistan each month during the latter half of 1986. What were the reasons for this?

"Heavy bombardment is being used in the northern provinces in attempts to depopulate the 'liberated areas'. They are trying to create a situation of famine and great fear among the population. They are trying to force people either to come to the occupied areas or to leave the country. Because of this a large number have been coming daily from the northern provinces. Just now (December 1986) 15 to 20,000 families are living in Pakistan without shelter, having arrived just recently. In one night 24 children died of the cold.



Gulbudeen Hekmatyar, leader of Hisbe Islami (Hekmatyar). *Photo courtesy of the Islamic Alliance of Afghan Mujahideen in London.*

You have stated that negotiations about the future of Afghanistan should not take place without the participation of the Mujahideen. Why?

"I think it is the right of the Mujahideen to hold the seat of Afghanistan in the United Nations. It is wrong that the Afghan people are being represented by their enemy, the Kabul Regime, the one who has been killing their people, destroying their country, and is supported by foreign troops. The Mujahideen are the true representatives of the Afghan people."

If the Soviet forces leave would you be willing to work with the Afghan communists?

"The communists are very few and because of this the Russians sent their forces to support them. The whole nation is involved in the resistance against the Russians. The communist party is unable to do anything. If it were not so, why did the Russians have to send in their troops? A few military officers trained in Russia took power in a coup d'etat. There is not a strong communist movement in Afghanistan. If the Russians withdraw, what would be the future of this movement? They are just a few people so the problem is very easy. They would not remain in Afghanistan, they would go to Russia. The key problem is the presence of Russian troops. If the Russians withdraw the problem will be over."

A conflict arose over the visit of four leaders of the seven party Alliance of Mujahideen to the United States in June 1986. Is the Alliance holding?

"It is an alliance and we have a spokesman who represents it at international gatherings. What that spokesman delivers has to be decided by all members of the Alliance. We are trying to strengthen this Alliance but we are facing some problems. Instead of visiting the United States I think it would have been better to work to make the organisation stronger. But unfortunately some of our friends were pressured into going to the United States instead of thinking of unity. The unity was affected by this visit to some extent. It was plain that they were not representing the Alliance. In important cases like this there should have been the agreement of all the groups."

Do you see a danger that the war is being seen more and more as a conflict between the Superpowers rather than an attempt to expel the occupying forces?

"We don't want Afghanistan to be another Vietnam. We don't want Afghanistan to become a conflict between the Superpowers. We are fighting for an independent, free, Islamic Afghanistan and we should not allow it to become a battlefield for the Superpowers. This trip to the

United States provided propaganda material for the Russians to use against the Mujahideen. The Russians used this trip by the four leaders to prove there is a foreign interference in Afghanistan."

Inside Afghanistan, some Western media reports suggest the Mujahideen are not faring well against the Soviet and Regime forces. What is your assessment of the situation?

"I am satisfied with the situation of the Mujahideen. It is better than the year before, and overall the situation is good. The losses of the enemy have been so high that they have been forced to admit to Afghanistan being a 'bleeding wound' and that they are trying to withdraw as soon as possible.

The reports published by some correspondents indicate that they went in with weak parties who have no real role in the resistance. After seeing these parties in action they then report that all parties are like these. You cannot tell anything about the Jihad by travelling with these groups."

Reports on the Government's attempt to destroy the Mujahideen stronghold at Zhawar were mixed.

"I was present during the Zhawar operation. I saw the whole operation from beginning to end. And because of the effective role of Hisbe Islami in the fighting although the enemy entered the base, they were forced to leave, and were not able to carry away their dead. Unfortunately, the reports indicated that instead of counting the successes of the Mujahideen, they were insisting the Mujahideen had been defeated because the bases were captured. The Government has accepted that 14 planes were shot down in the fighting, the Government of Afghanistan have accepted this. This one of the most successful operations by the Mujahideen because of the effective role of Hisbe Islami."

There has been a great deal of publicity over the decision by the US Government to send Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the Mujahideen.

"Ask the groups that receive them. We see in the field that whenever there are these rumours, the Russians increase their attrocities, they bring new types of weapons. I think this was just a plot for publicity, to accuse the Mujahideen and to suggest that such sophisticated weapons are provided for the Mujahideen, nothing more. We obtain most of our weapons by capturing them."

Over the years there has been some conflict between the political parties that make up the Afghan Resistance. Why is the Western media keen to criticise the role of Hisbe Islami?



Hisbe Islami Mujahideen near Jaji, Paktia. *Photo: Colin Boyle.*

"They have nothing more to say about Hisbe Islami. They say that Hisbe Islami is involved in internal fighting. These are only accusations. But we started this resistance mentally and physically. Hisbe Islami was the creator of this resistance against the Russians in Afghanistan. The first bullet was fired by Hisbe against the Russians, the first Russian tanks were destroyed by Hisbe, the first plane was shot down by Hisbe, the first Russian prisoner was shown to the world by Hisbe, the first martyr was from Hisbe. Still thousands of our people are in jail. But still we are accused by the West of having some links with the Russians, that we have links with Libya. And also there are accusations that we are involved in internal fighting. We are completely against internal fighting and we would never allow our Mujahideen to take part in this. But unfortunately on some occasions when we are fighting against Government militia it is quoted that it is internal fighting. There are many such groups of militia which are supported by the Russians, equipped by Russians, working for Russians, but they were able to receive a card from one of the parties claiming they are Mujahid, but actually fighting against the Mujahideen. They have created trouble amongst the Mujahideen, then they have gone and joined the Government once again, and we have many, many examples of this. But it has been quoted by some parties as internal fighting. There is no internal fighting and we are completely against it. These are just accusations against Hisbe."

What level of support does Hisbe Islami have inside Afghanistan and what role would it play following a Soviet withdrawal?

"It doesn't matter how much support we have. We don't want a bloodbath. We want to preserve the nation. Even if we didn't get a majority in parliament, we would at least have achieved one of the most important points of our programme: the liberation of the country from the Russians. But we are convinced that Hisbe will win a tangible majority in elections."

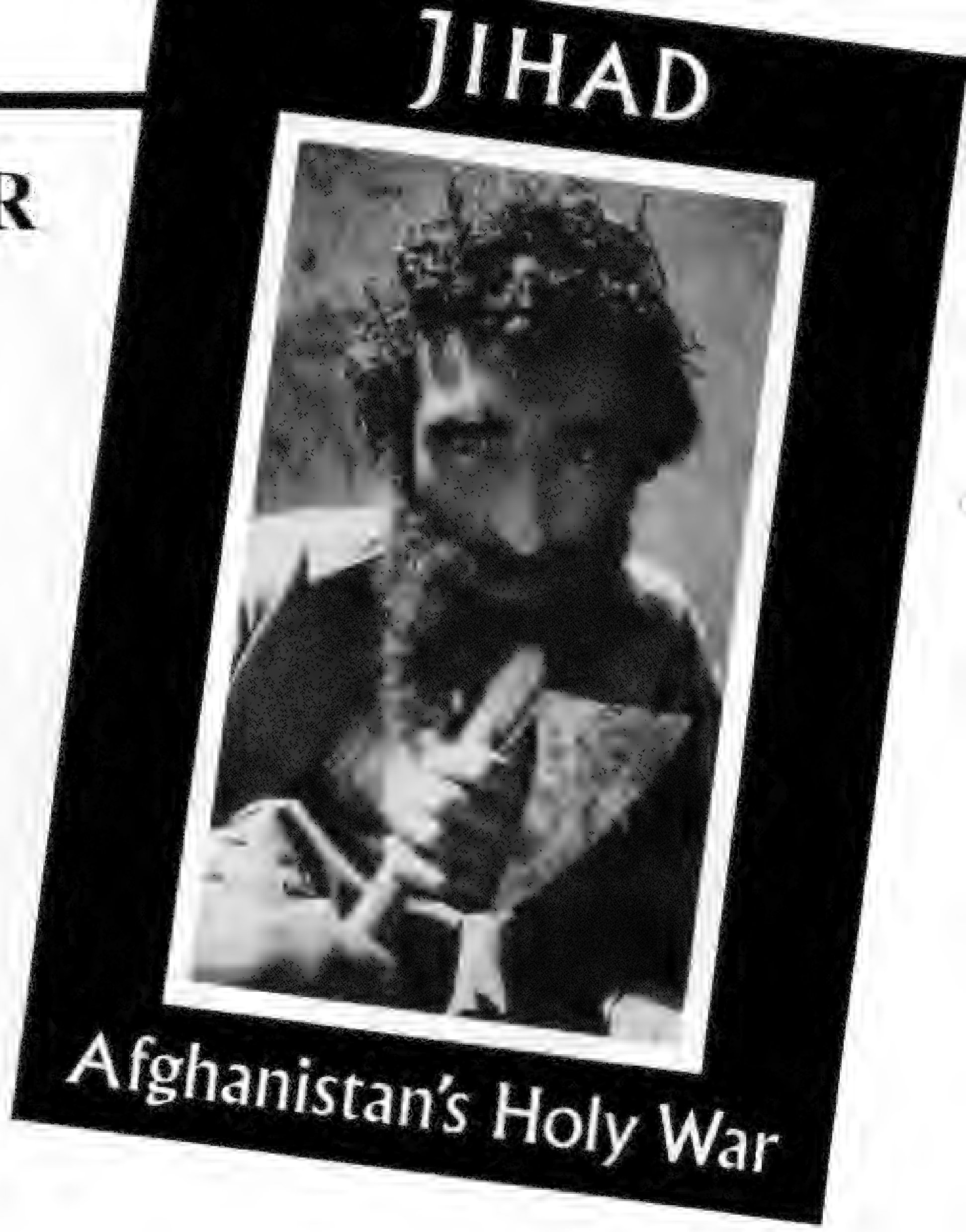
Critics from other Mujahideen parties say that Hisbe Islami is stockpiling weapons and refraining from fighting. What is your reply to this accusation?

"If Hisbe avoids fighting you will see hardly any fighting anymore. Those who know the situation inside Afghanistan don't say things like this. 70 per cent of the injured Mujahideen in hospitals here in Peshawar are members of Hisbe. The Hisbe has borne the brunt of the fighting this year. It is no exaggeration to say that 80 per cent of the fighting in Afghanistan is done by Hisbe. People are only looking for a pretext to criticise us. These kind of accusations are farily old. We are not stockpiling weapons in order to prepare a takeover in Afghanistan."

IMAGES OF HOLY WAR

Julian Gearing

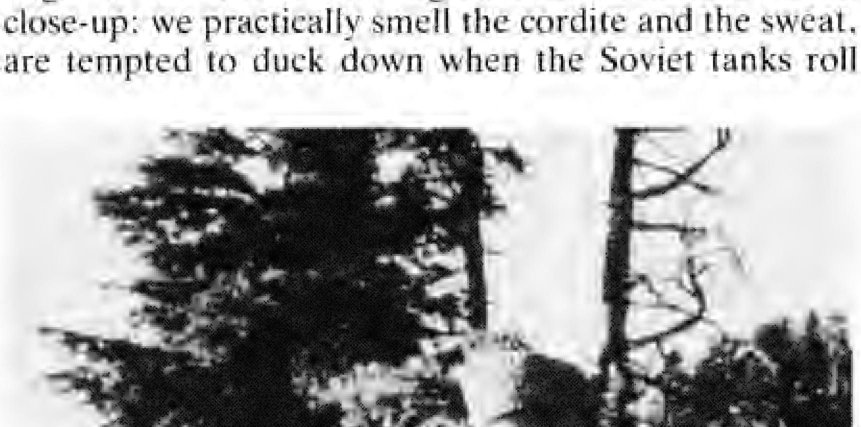
Few television documentaries have been made on the war in Afghanistan. The following article describes the reaction to two films shown in 1986 — Sandy Gall's 'Afghanistan: Agony of a Nation' and Jeff Harmon and Alex Lindsay's 'Jihad — Afghanistan's Holy War', winner of the Royal Television Society Award for Best International Current Affairs Documentary.



The action of the Afghans who protested outside the BBC in London on 17th October 1986 contrasted strikingly with what *The Daily Telegraph* described as 'a vintage night for the BBC' and the Everyman press release as 'the definitive document of the war in Afghanistan'.

The film that caused such a stir was *'Jihad — Afghanistan's Holy War'*, shown as the first in a season of Everyman documentaries in October and in the United States in December. Taking over a year to make, the film centred on a group of Mujahideen in Kandahar. The film-makers, Jeff Harmon and Alex Lindsay, stated that they were trying to show the war through the eyes of the fighters at the front. Harmon, whose previous work includes coverage of both sides of the conflict in El Salvador, stated he was not trying to put a message across. "Most documentaries are made according to the director's ideological point-of-view. My two documentaries, *'THE FRONT LINE'* and *'JIHAD — Afghanistan's Holy War'*, reflect the points-of-view of the people I filmed. It is a challenge to bury one's own background and beliefs, keeping a critical eye on your subjects. It also means spending a considerable amount of time with psychotics, assassins, fanatics and people on the edge, in order to fully understand their logic and motivations."

Previewing the film, Peter Davalle in *The Times* described it as 'a remarkable film about the peasant-amateurs who have taken on the combined military might of the Soviet and Afghan armies. This is war in close-up: we practically smell the cordite and the sweat, are tempted to duck down when the Soviet tanks roll into view and to dodge away when the nine-year-old urchin who claims to have killed enemy troops, advances with machine-gun barrel pointing at our heads. For the first time in my experience, director Jeff B. Harmon and cameraman Alexander Lindsay have used film to explain exactly why the Mujahideen of Afghanistan are ready, willing — and, indeed, almost desperate — to die a martyr's death.'



Alex Lindsay and Jeff Harmon filming inside Afghanistan.

The resulting picture was far from an idealized view of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. The hashish smoker, the executioner, the prisoner being dragged around in chains, the corpses of prisoners bayonetted to death, all were strong images. So strong that one Mujahideen spokesman exclaimed, "They are trying to make us look like terrorists. It is obvious this film was made with the help of the Kabul Regime."

Harmon responded angrily to this accusation. "This is outrageous and insulting, a pathetic remark. The Soviet forces attempted to capture and kill me and Alex. We took great risks to make this film."

"A lot of the complaints stem from the fact that I am showing the war through the eyes of the peasants at the front", explained Harmon. "They are too poor or committed to leave."

"Their political leaders, safely ensconced in Peshawar, naturally find the film offensive, as did the generals when they saw film of their men in World War One. They do not think of them in flesh and blood terms, only in the abstract. These leaders are using their people as cannon fodder. They are gaining a great deal through corruption and they do not want to disturb this. There is a need for the redistribution of aid to the people fighting at the front, not to the people playing World War One in Peshawar."

In my conversations with Harmon and Lindsay during the period they were filming and editing *'Jihad'*, it became clear that although they were looking for striking images it was also important to them that the film was


Sandy Gall and film crew inside Afghanistan in September 1986.

objective. Harmon explained: "In the context of war, their (the Mujahideen's) conduct, though brutal, was understandable. The Soviets have set Afghans on fire, buried them alive, dragged them to their deaths on the back of tanks. But to see the humiliation of this prisoner (being dragged around in chains) on film clearly shocked the projectionist (during editing). I had not set out to make a propaganda film, but to show the war from the Mujahideen side in all its noble and ignoble aspects. While some of the motivations of the Afghans may be considered 'primitive' by the standards of western civilization, it was my intention to capture these motivations in an objective and clear fashion".

Critics point out that the film focused on the negative aspects of the Mujahideen, which were more exciting visually than the boring grind of everyday life in Kandahar. In some sequences the Mujahideen appear to have played up for the camera. Yet in many the camera appears not to intrude.

Despite all the criticism levelled at the film, it is a professionally produced documentary, during the making of which the film-makers put themselves at great risk. However, it did fail on one small, but important point. The uninformed viewer would be forgiven for thinking the picture painted in this film was an accurate representation of all the Mujahideen throughout Afghanistan. None of the commentary in the film indicates otherwise.

Looking at the documentary made by British TV journalist Sandy Gall the viewer obtains a different picture. *'Agony of a Nation'* made for Central Television was the result of Gall's third trip to Afghanistan. He does not hide his lack of impartiality in this conflict, nor his interest in one particular commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud. The difficulties of filming this war were amply demonstrated on his first trip to interview this commander in 1982. At that time his logistics failed with the result that his equipment was in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, on his latest trip the weeks of walking, and in this case excellent timing, resulted in exciting film of Massoud's forces taking a major Regime garrison at Fakhar. The camerawork depicting the grandeur of the scenery and in the thick of battle was excellent thanks to the services of Noel Smart and Andy Skrzypkowiak.

The star of the film was Massoud, a quiet, confident, and hardworking commander. We see him patiently dealing with civilian problems, as well as training his Mujahideen and preparing them for the assault on the garrison.

Where the film differs from 'Jihad' is in its emphasis on the effect the war is having on civilians. *'Jihad'* originally contained footage of civilians in the refugee camps but this was edited out as it probably did not 'fit in' with the main subject of the film (Note — this footage was shown in the US at Harmon's insistance). The moving interviews with men, women, and children in Gall's film strongly emphasise that it is the civilians who appear to be suffering the most in the continuing war.

In their own way both 'Jihad' and 'Agony of a Nation' vividly portrayed facets of the conflict in Afghanistan. But neither told, or intended to tell, the whole story.

AFGHANISTAN
AGONY OF A NATION

Review

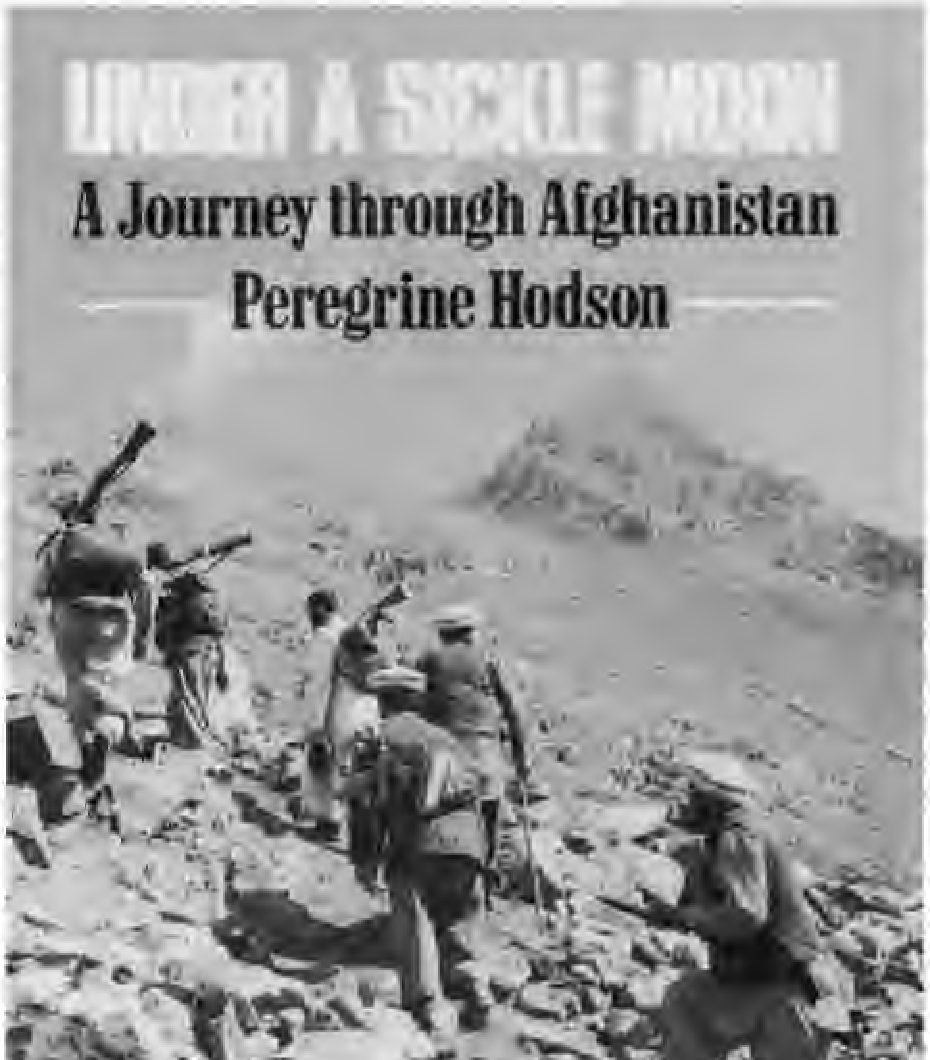
'UNDER A SICKLE MOON' by Peregrine Hodson

Ken Guest

'Under a Sickle Moon' by Peregrine Hodson is the latest offering about Afghanistan. Unlike other recent publications, Mr Hodson's book does not deal primarily with the sad strife that plagues that land. It is more of a travel narrative about his long amble through the war-stricken country.

At walking pace, Mr Hodson covered some 1000 miles in Afghanistan, mostly by foot, sometimes on horseback and briefly also by rickety local truck. I hasten to add that this journey took place in some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth, ranging from deserts to the majestic but unforgiving heights of the Hindu Kush. That he should opt to undertake the journey at all deserves commendation. To undertake it at a time when the land was locked in a gruelling guerrilla war deserves outright admiration, though some people might have second thoughts about Mr Hodson's sanity.

The end result of it all is a meticulous narrative written in an easy-going style. Mr Hodson presents to the reader a vivid account of the events that befell him — a seemingly endless saga of mishaps from which he had the talent to emerge unscathed, only to face even greater misfortune right around the corner. That he survived we can all be grateful for, as he has written an excellent book which is far more than just another litany of sore feet and personal hardship. All along the route of his travels Mr Hodson was able to converse fluently with the Afghans in their native tongue Dari. This is a dialect of the Persian language Farsi, which the author studied at Merton College, Oxford. Exactly what Mr Hodson was doing among them seems to have been something of a mystery to the Afghans and I am sure, at times, just as much of a mystery to Mr Hodson himself.



Although he was not looking for the war as such, the war sometimes found him. On his journey into the country he travelled with an arms convoy which was ambushed by a rival Mujahideen group and all the arms were stolen. Beating a hasty withdrawal from this encounter they nearly drowned in the freezing waters of a river during a night crossing. Once in the apparent safety and relative comfort of the small town of Nahrin, again Mr Hodson was faced with the harsh reality of the war, as Soviet jets started bombing the town. He was confronted with the maimed and the dead, and with casualties among the young and the old.

Later he met two British journalists filming for CBS television, Peter Jouvenal and Julian Gearing. It is with many of Julian Gearing's colour photographs that the book is illustrated. Feeling that safety must at last be at hand, in numbers if nothing else, the last dark surprise was sprung. Soviet Commandos invaded the valley where the group were sheltering in a dilapidated shepherd's hut. They were literally forced to flee for their lives, abandoning the last of their possessions and finally reaching Pakistan with not much more than they stood up in.

Once safely back in the UK there was yet another surprise in store for the author. He contracted hepatitis and was confined to hospital where he pondered writing a book of all that had befallen him. I for one am pleased that he did and have no hesitation in recommending his book as a most revealing insight into the lives of many of those caught up in the war.

It was his ability to converse with his travelling companions and others that he met along the way in this country at war that has enabled Mr Hodson to write with such depth of feeling for the Afghans. Through him they live and speak. Indeed it was the often heard request of many of those he met that he should 'tell the world of their plight'. An obligation he has well fulfilled.

With this gripping account of his journey with the rebel Mujahideen through Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, Peregrine Hodson joins that select band of travel writers like Bruce Chatwin, Colin Thubron and Vikram Seth who can make us alive to the human condition in the most inhuman places.

Shouldering his pack at the frontier he casts an innocent eye over his Afghan companions: the youngsters with Lee-Enfields and kalashnikovs, the Professor cooling his feet in a stream and explaining how war changes the hearts of men, the shrewd mullah Maulawi with whom he discusses Persian poetry and the thousand names of God.

THE LONDON EVENING STANDARD

Review

'ISLAM AND RESISTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN' by Olivier Roy

Anthony Hyman

First published in May 1985 by *Editions du Seuil* under the title 'L' AFGHANISTAN – ISLAM ET MODERNITE POLITIQUE' this book was translated by *Cambridge University Press* in late 1986.

The French specialist Olivier Roy has written a detailed study of the organisation and progress of the Afghan Resistance, examining in depth virtually every relevant aspect of the struggle. His knowledge comes mainly from annual trips to the different provinces of Afghanistan, which have helped give Roy a remarkable insight into the evolution of the popular struggle over the past seven years. In particular, Roy analyses the ideological basis of Afghan Resistance to a foreign-backed communist regime, which he complains is largely misunderstood still in the Western media.

This book argues that the peculiar traditional patterns of Afghan society, in particular the weak development of state authority outside the capital, Kabul, gives the popular Resistance its strength, but also impose some serious limitations upon it. Traditional organisation of society still counts for much, but Roy points out many significant shifts of power between or within different groups since the Soviet invasion. In Afghanistan's tribal areas, for example, the tribal chiefs (khans) rarely play an important part in the struggle, which tends to be led by religious leaders (mullahs or ulema).

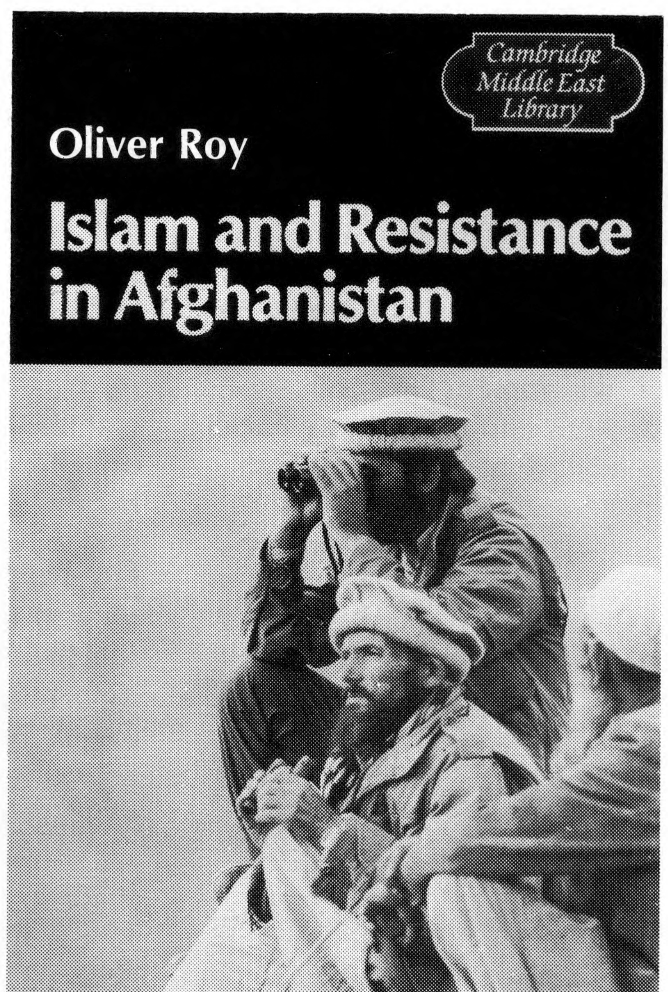
There are four basic networks in Afghan society identified here, which are judged crucial to resistance organisations, providing essential links at grassroots level; the tribal network, the Sufi orders, the ulema and the Muslim Fundamentalists, called 'Islamicists' by the author. Through these networks the parties based in exile all form links with resistance groups.

Roy pays particular attention to the manner in which the 'Islamicists' (or Fundamentalists) have spread their influence in Afghan society since the guerrilla warfare began in earnest. He notes that the unity of 'jihad' (struggle in defence of Islam) is continually threatened by the factor of tribal competition throughout the country's tribal regions, which is being cleverly exploited in Pushtun areas by the Kabul government's counter-guerrilla strategy.

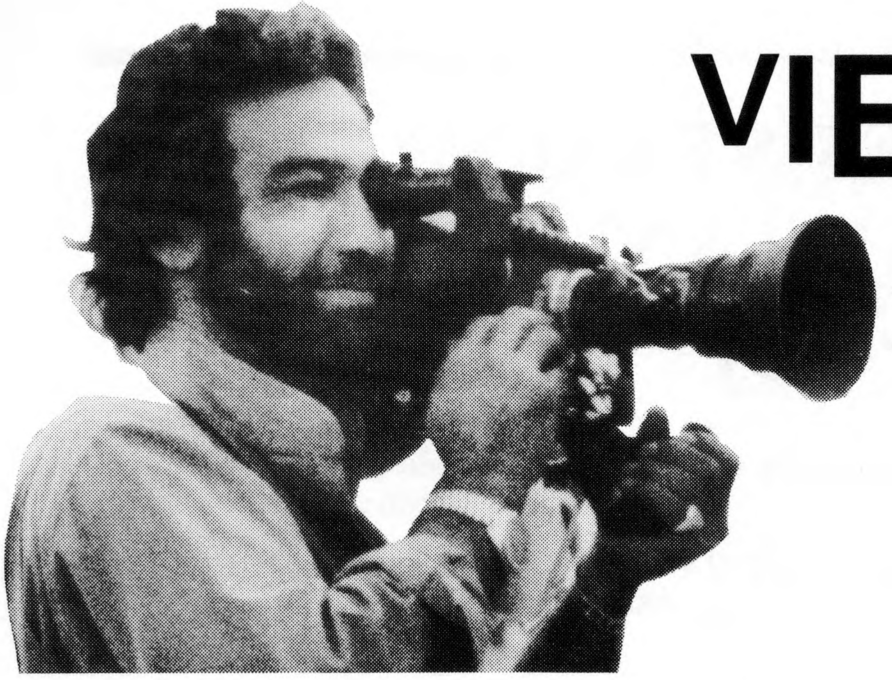
Another obstacle in the way of forging unity over wide regions of Afghanistan comes from persistent rivalries and conflicts between the various 'gawm' (ethnic or kinship groups), according to Roy, who sees a serious weakness in the Resistance because of the localised nature of the guerrilla struggle. With only a few outstanding exceptions, he says, guerrillas will not leave their local area, even if there is a military target of value a short way outside it. This localised nature of the struggle, quite as much as political rivalries within the Resistance, is responsible for its failure so far to formulate a nationwide strategy against Soviet domination, writes Roy.

However, he judges this same localisation of the guerrilla struggle as resulting in one major advantage from the Resistance side; these lightly-armed guerrillas spread over the country cannot be wiped out by military means, as could regular army posts and military targets. In spite of their superior organisation and firepower, Soviet forces and the small, demoralised Afghan Army, concludes the writer, are presented with great problems in the counter-insurgency operations. As long as the Resistance persists and keeps popular backing in the country as a whole, Roy believes the Kabul regime will fail to consolidate its power, even in the capital where, he says, the regime is hated and despised by much of the population.

The writer expects little from international peace negotiations, anticipating a long war in Afghanistan. "Whatever its results, later on we shall see that it does not mark a simple stage in Soviet expansionism, but a decisive turning point," says Roy. He ridicules the idea advanced by the Russians that Afghan guerrillas are merely 'basmachis', (doomed Muslim counter-revolutionaries who fought the Bolsheviks in Central Asia). And the Soviet Empire today may be huge, but it is dangerously over-extended, he warns, no longer seen as the 'natural ally' of Third World movements or the bright model of the world's future either.



Both these books can be ordered from Rosemarie Clancy at the Afghanistan Support Committee office at 18 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0LT. For UK orders **'Under a Sickle Moon'** is available at £12.95 and **'Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan'** costs £10.95 (Both inclusive of p+p).



VIEWPOINT

Habib Kawyani

Habib Kawyani, an Afghan cameraman, has filmed in many different areas of Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979. He visited Kabul in 1981 and has been to Kandahar and the Eastern provinces many times. Here Habib talks to *James Henderson* about a trip made in 1986.

'Each trip inside Afghanistan has its special moments — the pressure is intense and the journey is often a challenge in itself. It depends of course on which part of the country you go to. For instance, the trip I made to Herat in 1983 I enjoyed very much. It was not easy to get there and when I reached the city I discovered that I was only the second cameraman to visit Herat since the invasion of 1979.'

Other trips include visits to Kandahar and the South-Western provinces of Farah and Shindand in 1984 and one to the capital city, Kabul, in 1981.

"I managed to film the airport, the Palace and the Russian Embassy and the town itself from one end to the other.

Trained at the Indian Poona Institute in 1967, Habib started his career working for Afghanfilm in Kabul which was responsible for news coverage on Afghan television and involved in the making of feature films. In 1970 he took a four-year assignment working for the United Nations from which he retured to Afghanistan for one year in 1974. Another assignment abroad took him to Jeddah and on the way back to Afghanistan at the end of the seventies he spent some time in iran. During this time the invasion took place:

'I stayed in Tehran in order to find out what would happen in Afghanistan. I had a feeling that the conflict would not last very long and so I decided to get a job there and wait for a year or two to see houw things turned out. I made the right decision not to go back.'

In 1986 last year Habib made a trip to Kabul province, in an effort to get to the capital city once again.

The trip was carefully planned and I was delighted at how many offers of help I had received. I was promised transport — jeeps and motorcycles — and even buildings to film from.

'But people were also warning me that it would not be as easy as last time. The people in Kabul have to be more careful now. They have to watch out all the time as there are more agents on the streets. They are up against a tough opposition because the KHAD has become very big. It is a secret city and impossible to trust anybody. However, I was impressed by stories of girl students who are very (attr)active and take pictures of the Russian movements around the city and so I felt that it should be possible.

'I had succeeded once before and I thought I could do it again. It is not impossible, to be honest, but it was made much more difficult two years ago when the Russians created their inner security belt. To get through this you have to have quite a bit of luck.

'I was planning to get there in early summer and it should have been over in a few weeks from the time I reached Kabul. The problem did not arise in Kabul itself but rather in getting there.

'On my first attempt I left Pakistan at the end of June and travelled to Chakari, south of Kabul. The commander who I was with had offered assistance — two men to help me get into the city and he said that he knew someone with transport in Kabul itself who would be able to help.

'He had sent two men off as scouts to arrange it all for me. Unfortunately, when these two were about to enter the city, the village they were waiting in was searched by Government troops and they were taken prisoner. They did not return and it was only later that we heard they had been captured.

'I was amazed to see Chakari because it used to be a highly populated area, a beautiful place, and now it was a city of ghosts — nobody was living there because of the heavy bombing. When I was there before there had been lots of people and you used to get food and shelter from them, but now you cross the border towards Kabul and all the towns are completely abandoned. There were lots of beautiful houses and gardens, many still intact, but there is no water because nobody is left to irrigate them.'

Chakari lies just outside the third security zone surrounding Kabul and consistent bombing has emptied the area of its population, making it easier for the Government to deal with Mujahideen troops.

'After ten days waiting for the scouts to come back, Chakari itself was attacked and the Mujahideen group I was with had to leave the area. I was forced to go with them.

'At one o'clock in the morning we could see the vehicle lights moving in the valley below, standing out in the darkness. The commander ordered thirty ground-to-ground missiles to be fired at the enemy and then we cleared out. We left the area and headed back to Pakistan.

'On the way back we passed through a place called Asra, once a well-populated area and a Mujahideen stronghold but which now is completely empty as a result of bombing. I tried to arrange my trip from here and received offers to go to Kabul by road, but it is dangerous and I did not have the right sort of identity papers on me, so instead I returned to Pakistan.

'I then came into contact with the Havakat; — Islami Shia minority group who said they would be prepared to help me get to Kabul. The idea was that once we got there I would film them during their operations in the city. They wanted to film incoming rockets which are fired from outside the inner security ring. They are launched from the mountains up to twelve miles away with a nine-volt battery. These rocket attacks also provide cover for the people at work in the city. They are active in Kabul. Many people work for the Government during the day

and then become guerrillas at night.

'On our way to the Shia base, we were just arriving at the chaikhana near Logar to the south of Kabul when we heard bombing nearby — it is often quite difficult to tell exactly where the bombing is in the mountains.'

'It turned out to be an attack on an arms convoy. Soon after, groups of Mujahideen began to arrive, first one of about fifteen or so, and then four of them carrying a huge man whose foot had just been blown off by an anti-personnel mine. They were from a large convoy which was travelling up to the north of Afghanistan.'

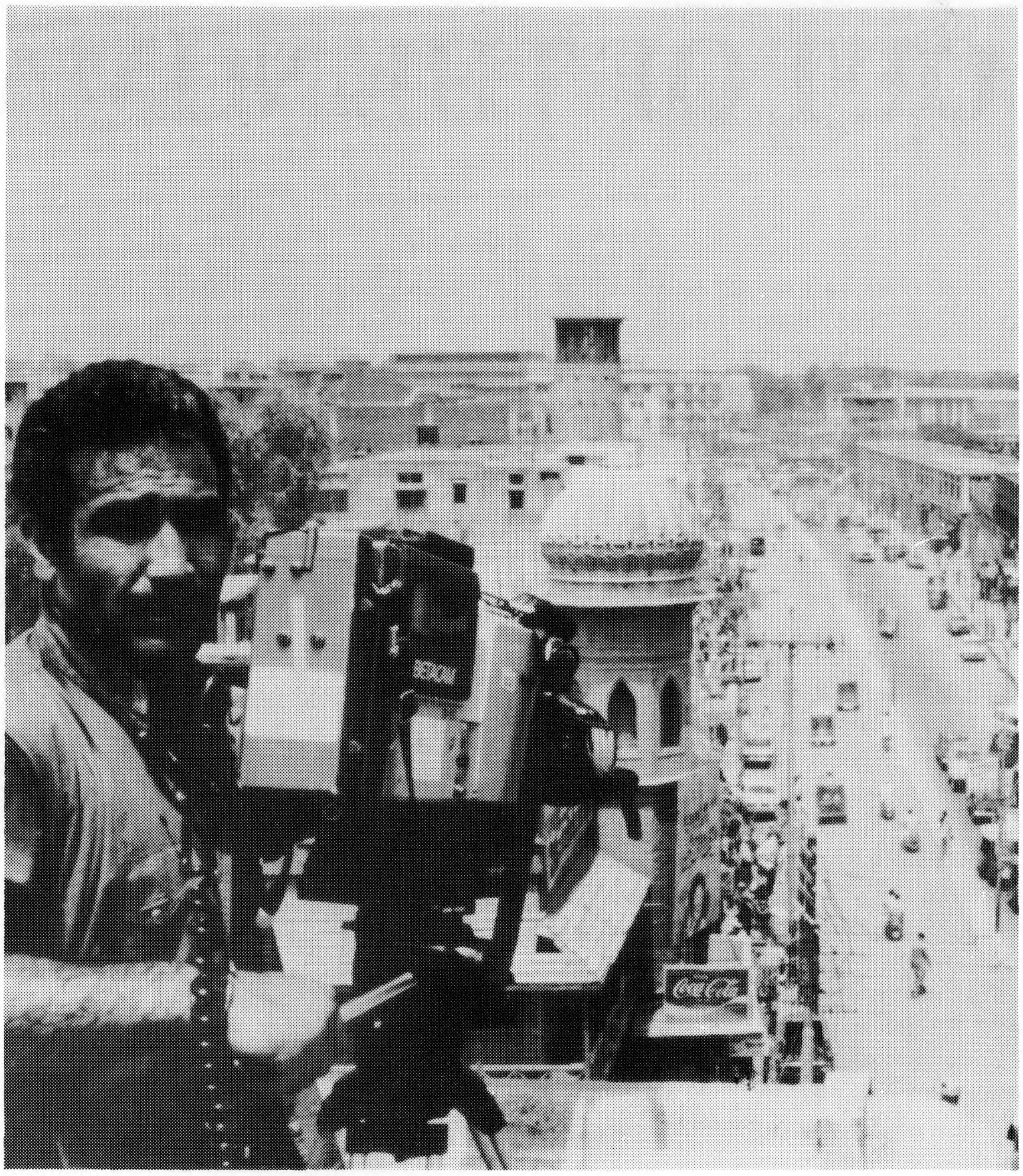
The convoy had been bombed by jets, which caused the horses to bolt in panic, leaving their loads strewn all over the ground. The jets had also dropped plastic mines to slow up the Mujahideen. These butterfly mines are dropped in clusters, spreading over a large area and are virtually impossible to see. Three men from the convoy were injured by these. The huge man who had been carried in died at five o'clock the next morning.

'Some Mujahideen had been ambushed on their retreat from the bombing raid and about ten had been taken prisoner. Most had escaped, without their weapons, and were slowly arriving at the chaikhana where we were staying. They had not had any food for three days and were desperate. The owner of the chaikhana closed up because he thought that his place would be next to be bombed, but soon some people from the group I was travelling with arrived with some food. The Government troops remained in the area for the next week and so we were held up on our journey.

'It took fifteen days in total to get to the base in Paghman district west of Kabul and here we waited for the right moment to pass through the innermost security ring and to get inside the city itself.'

The security rings are a series of posts in concentric circles around the capital, designed to prevent the free movement of the Mujahideen in and out of the city. On the inner ring these posts may be as little as eight hundred metres apart, with trip lines running between them.

'We had to wait about ten days because the moon was too bright to make the journey but eventually there was a suitable night. We set off from the base in daytime and waited for a few hours before it became dark enough to walk. We had a distance of about four miles



Habib Kawayani filming in Peshawar.

to cover through the security ring to the safe house on the outskirts of the city.

'The night was pitch black and we walked in two groups, in contact by password; four in front armed with Kalashnikovs and one RPG, and two others with me at the rear.

'At two o'clock in the morning we heard shooting up ahead and we threw ourselves into a ditch nearby. It seemed to be coming from all directions, tracer bullets were flying everywhere and grenades were exploding. We were panic-stricken as the fighting seemed to be heading towards us. After a while it tailed off and as soon as the shooting died down we headed back to a rocky area at a safe distance and took shelter in a ravine.

'After about half an hour one of the guys from the leading group managed to get back to us. He was horribly injured, just able to walk despite loss of blood and he explained that they had been unable to see anything but that bullets seemed to have come from all around. His face and hand were dreadfully damaged by a grenade and he was still losing blood. He was the only one who made it back and it seems that they had been ambushed by a night patrol.

'We turned back to the base and we arrived there at about ten o'clock in the morning. At the first village we hired a donkey for the injured man. Once we reached the base a man was sent out to see what had happened to the others but he could find out nothing so they sent a couple of kids to look for their remains.

'I was a bit shaken up by the episode anyway, but the worst of it was that here was a man dying of his wounds and yet we had no medical equipment to treat him with. He died at one o'clock in the afternoon.

'Later we discovered that security had been especially tight because just a couple of days before there had been a major attack on Kabul. The troops knew of a few of the routes used by the Mujahideen to get into Kabul and they must have been watching them.'

From there Habib was forced to return to Pakistan.

'It is a challenge, of course. Since 1981 I have travelled with plenty of different groups. When I see the Mujahideen doing well and that they are well organised it gives me some sort of hope that I can do something for them.'

OUT OF THE NOMAD'S TENT

A colourful and exotic shop called 'Out of the Nomad's Tent' has recently opened in Roupell Street on the South Bank, neatly situated between the Young Vic and Waterloo Station. Draped around the walls within hang beautiful 'Kilims'; intricate embroideries from Swat and Kohistan in Pakistan's North-West Frontier combine with pine and mulberry chests, carved chairs and wooden bowls to create an atmosphere of colour and warmth. Visitors descend the stairs to the basement and are immediately transported into a Nomad's Tent similar to those still used today in Kurdistan. There is a choice of strong black sweet Turkish tea, or cardoman flavoured Afghan tea while they browse through the enormous variety of kilims stacked against the walls.

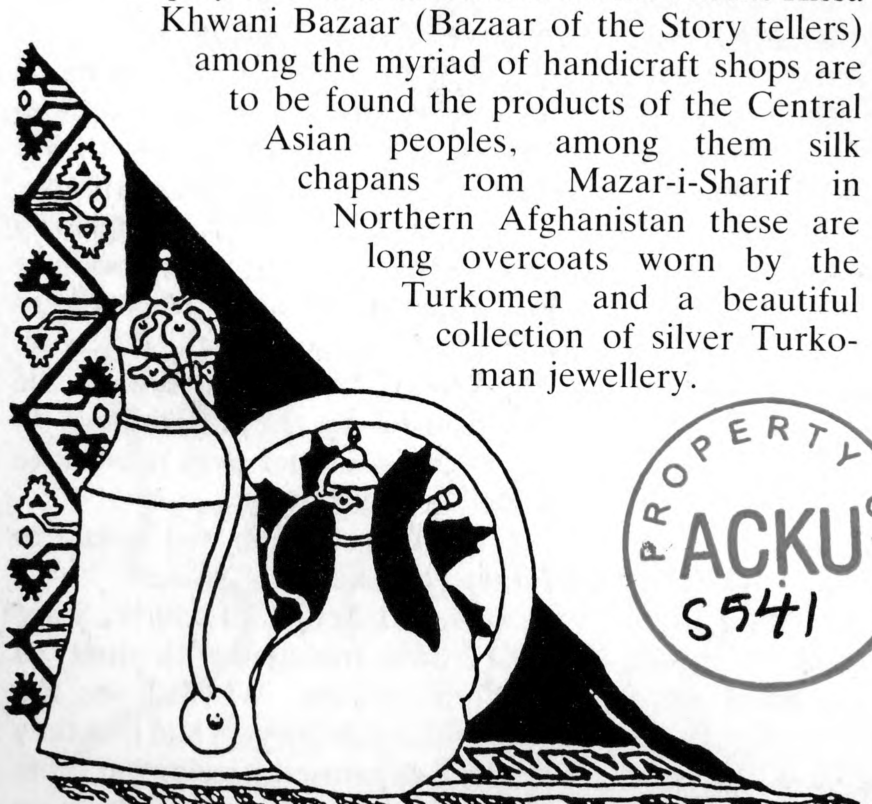


'Out of the Nomads Tent' is owned by Rufus Reade and managed by Harriet Sandys, both well-known in the world of Oriental Carpets. All the kilims have been personally collected by Rufus, often from remote and inaccessible areas in Eastern Anatolia on trips which cover many thousands of miles, and Harriet has assembled the wood, decorative items and embroideries during her trips to India and Pakistan.

The flat-woven rugs and the bags have been made by the women for the use of their own families; uninfluenced by commercial concern, they represent a true folk art. They are made of wool and are used as wall-hangings, bed-covers, donkey bags, camel sacks, as floor coverings and as dowry gifts for a young bride to take to her new home as part of her "bride wealth".

Many of the bags and rugs contain symbols which are regarded as lucky charms to keep an eye on Satan, protecting the owner's family and animals. These symbols are very old and archaeological evidence suggests that some patterns may date back as far as 6,000 years.

A visit to Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan provided many of the items on display at **'Out of the Nomad's Tent'**. In the Kissa Khwani Bazaar (Bazaar of the Story tellers) among the myriad of handicraft shops are to be found the products of the Central Asian peoples, among them silk chapans rom Mazar-i-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan these are long overcoats worn by the Turkomen and a beautiful collection of silver Turkoman jewellery.



TREASURES OF THE SILK ROUTE

From 12th May to 5th June **'Out of the Nomad's Tent'** staged a special exhibition of wares from Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan — *Sisanis, Iktas, Sofres, salt bags* and *Kilims* never shown before in the West.

Most pieces date from the nineteenth century — heirlooms created in Central Asia and brought to Pakistan by families fleeing the conflict in Afghanistan.

In the oasis towns along the *Silk Route*, which linked the two civilizations of Ancient China and Rome, there flourished traditions of embroidery and weaving.

Among them was silk *Ikat* weaving; the unique designs and intricate techniques passed from master-weaver to apprentice as a closely-guarded secret and the highly-prized cloth was used in the making of *chapans*, the long silk coats of Central Asia.

From Uzbekistan come *Sisanis*. Cotton panels, embroidered with silk yarn and sewn together, they make bedspreads, purdah curtains and religious wall-hangings. The skill has been passed down among the womenfolk and the *Susani* would form the most precious piece of a woman's dowry.

OUT OF THE NOMAD'S TENT, 61 Roupell Street, London SE1. (01-928 0675).
Shop hours: Noon–6.30 p.m. Tuesday–Friday
10 a.m.–6 p.m. Saturday
(Closed Sunday & Monday)